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DEVELOPING BIBLICAL COMMUNITY THROUGH SMALL
GROUPS MINISTRY AT BEAVERCREEK BAPTIST
CHURCH, BEAVERCREEK, OHIO

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PREFACE

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many. First, I want to thank Dr. Michael Wilder. Dr. Wilder became a good listener, advisor, and encourager. If it were not for his encouragement I would have withdrawn from the program. Second, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. John David Trentham. Thank you for your recommendations that have helped my work experience new insights and pushed me to excel.

I want to thank the people of Beavercreek Baptist Church for their participation in this project and for their support of me as their pastor. I especially want to thank the adult small group leaders of the church: Roger Browning, Dr. Mark Caudle, Dr. Michael Gargas, and Nathan Gargas. These men have spent many hours working through this project and ministering to the people in their small groups. Dr. Mark Caudle spent many hours editing my paper, offering style and theological guidance. Thank you, Mark.

I especially want to thank my wife, Stephanie, for her sacrificial commitment and unwavering support throughout this project. I would not be the man I am today if it were not for her. She has been my encourager and motivator throughout this journey. This project would never have been completed if it were not for her help.

John A. Heading

Beavercreek, Ohio

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to guide members of Beaver creek Baptist Church, Beaver creek, Ohio, to function in biblical community through small groups.

Goals

This project sought to accomplish five goals. The first goal of the project was to assess the current understanding of biblical community, the current practice of biblical community, and the current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups in Beaver creek Baptist Church, Beaver creek, Ohio. Adults participated in a church-wide survey to measure this goal. The results of the survey served as a baseline against which growth could be measured. A t-test for dependent samples was utilized to determine whether there was a positive statistical difference between the pre-project and post-project survey. This goal was deemed successful by the completion of the survey.¹

From October 6, 2013, to March 30, 2014, Beaver creek Baptist Church averaged 105 in active worship attendance.² Of those 105, 65 percent, or an average of 67 of the attendees were adults over the age of eighteen. The objective was for 80 percent of active adults to participate in the survey, which would be 54 adults. The survey also asked for participants to identify themselves as leaders or attendees of Beaver creek

¹See appendix 1, "Developing Biblical community through Small Groups Assessment Tool."

²All statistics were calculated from information obtained from Beaver creek Baptist Church.

Baptist Church. This offered greater insight into the understanding of biblical community of the church as a whole and a comparison between leaders and attendees.

The second goal was to provide a framework of biblical community that addressed an understanding and practice of biblical community in small groups. This goal was met through a six-week preaching series.³ The series used Sunday morning sermons with audience handouts and audio recordings. The recorded messages were then shared on the church website, to allow those who could not be in attendance to follow the series. To encourage adult participants to be active for the entire six-week series, email reminders were sent each week. The measure of what participants understood regarding biblical community was revealed through the completion of the post-survey.⁴ This goal of providing a framework for biblical community was deemed successful by an increase in those gaining the framework information, as indicated in the post survey and by a 10 percent increase in community participation through small group involvement.

The third goal was to equip small group leaders to lead their small groups to function in biblical community. This goal was met through a six-week training course, and the effectiveness of this training was measured by an online survey of the small group leaders to measure their understanding of biblical community in small groups from the training model.⁵ Training covered small groups during the time of Christ, community in small groups of the early church, and best practices of small groups that lead to community. The sermon series content from Goal 2 served as the training material for small group leaders. Small group leaders met with the pastor to consider the week's teaching and then worked together to apply that week's teaching to their small group. The

³See appendix 5, “Biblical Community Through Small Groups.”

⁴See appendix 1, “Developing Biblical Community Through Small Groups Assessment Tool.”

⁵See appendix 2, “Online Survey for Small Group Leaders.”

meetings typically involved a time to discuss the material presented, group suggestions as to the significance and application of the material, and then action steps to apply material to their respective small groups. While small group leaders were being trained on biblical community and best practices of small groups, they assessed their small groups' function, as well as their own leadership of those small groups and recommended needed changes to align their small groups with biblical practices. This goal was deemed successful when adult small group leaders scored a minimum of 90 percent on their online survey.

The fourth goal was for equipped leaders to implement the needed changes in small groups during weeks nine through fourteen of the project. The leaders implemented changes in their small groups and brought them into line with the leader's new understanding of biblical community. The project facilitator communicated weekly with each small group leader and assessed their success in implementing the new methods. The facilitator also led them to implement all changes agreed upon during the training phase.⁶ Completion of this goal was measured by the implementation of best practices related to community in small groups that were determined during the leader equipping stage. When all the best practices were implemented, this goal was deemed successful.

The fifth goal was to assess the progress being made toward biblical community. The original participants were surveyed again⁷ and those results were compared to the individual's first survey answers.⁸ This comparison evaluated the progress individuals made in their understanding and practice of biblical community. This evaluation was then used to determine whether any impact on participation in biblical community in small groups was detected. Successful completion of the survey

⁶A formal best practices document was not created but rather a list of best practices were created and will be outlined in detail in Chapter 4; Goal 3; Stage 3: Best Practices Establishment.

⁷See appendix 1, "Developing Biblical Community Through Small Groups Assessment Tool."

⁸See appendix 6, "t-Test Survey Results."

and evidence of significant statistical growth by 80 percent of the original survey participants was the first bench mark of success for this goal. Ten percent of the participants who completed both surveys were interviewed to gain further insight into their understanding of biblical community in small groups.⁹ The completion of these surveys constituted the second bench mark of success for this goal. The interview involved asking participants about their responses to the survey questions and their motivation for answering the way they did.

Ministry Context

Beavercreek Baptist Church was a church plant of East Dayton Baptist Church. East Dayton Baptist Church is a traditional, functioning Southern Baptist Church, those traditional practices were mirrored in the church plant when it started in 1958. From the beginning, Beavercreek Baptist Church provided Sunday School classes for all ages. These classes served as their small group structure. However, ministry was primarily done by the deacons and pastor. As long as the church stayed small, this process worked. The church functioned as a single-cell small group, caring for each other.

Small groups at Beavercreek Baptist Church struggled to function in biblical community and to participate in best practices of small groups. Beavercreek Baptist Church still offers small groups for all ages, but participants in the church have little understanding of how these small groups should function and what benefits there are to functioning in this way.

One reason groups struggled to function in biblical community is the proportion of military members in the church. Forty percent of Beavercreek Baptist Church participants are active duty military personnel from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, while others are retired military. Many have traveled around the world participating

⁹See appendix 3, "Personal Interview of Selected Participants."

in a variety of religious traditions which do not practice community in small groups. Military personnel also move on a regular basis; they rarely remain for more than four years, and personnel are reluctant to get involved in a small group to build relationships.

A second reason groups struggled to function in biblical community can be related to conflict in the church history. I became the senior pastor in December 2004. In 2005, Beaver Creek Baptist Church grew rather quickly to an average attendance of over 200. Needed changes due to this growth caused friction in the church, primarily from a feeling of losing community in the church as a whole. The church wanted to continue to function as one large group and resisted change. In an effort to keep the church from losing its sense of community, growth was restricted and division occurred. In 2006 the church suffered two splits, returning the church back to one large group. The process to keep community actually destroyed community. This process of growth and loss was a recurring practice at Beaver Creek Baptist Church.

A third reason groups struggled to function in biblical community was due to a lack of consistent participation in small groups. Many of the families who attended Beaver Creek Baptist Church did not see the need to participate in small groups or even seek membership to become active in ministry. Church life with other believers was just one among many things they could have in their lives, but it was not a priority over other things. When other issues got in the way of actively participating in biblical community in small groups, participants struggled with where to utilize their time and energy.

Biblical community provides relationships, accountability and ministry together. It is difficult to achieve unless people are involved in a small group. The people at Beaver Creek Baptist Church give evidence that they want community. However, when they have a need, they contact the pastor, not a small group. Unfortunately, a pastor can only do so much. The deacons and I can meet certain needs, but that should not take the place of biblical community in small groups as a way of caring for each other.

Rationale

Local churches are a covenant community set apart for the Lord's service. The early church knew what it meant to live in community and that lifestyle is documented in Acts 2:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)¹⁰

The church must also live by the example taught in this passage. The people of Beaver Creek Baptist Church have risen to the occasion to meet any need, but generally the need was met by the whole church. The church would give money to fill the food pantry and help others participate in a mission trip, but struggled in turning to a small group of people for help. Few deep relationships were built between families that lead to living life together. Some have said they do not need to attend a small group to be a Christian or to grow. These people have missed the whole point of covenant community.

This church will not grow or thrive without living in covenant community through small groups. When the church experienced a great struggle in 2006, the church rallied together, as one group, to move forward. Since then however, the church still lives by that same large group mentality. Most things in the church have been done by the church as a whole being led by a few people. This places a great burden on the few who are seen as the caregivers of the church.

Therefore this project is vital to the health and growth of Beaver Creek Baptist Church and the people who worship there. Without an intentional process to lead the church to understand covenant community, and how to live that way, then the church will

¹⁰Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New King James Bible.

stay the way it is. It will have few lasting relationships, a few people to call friend whom members can call when they need something or when a major life event occurs.

On the other hand, without the project, Beaver Creek Baptist Church will continue to do just fine. The church will meet budget, provide Vacation Bible School, and sponsor a few missions around the world. The church will be average. But why be just average? A church in this position will not function the way the Lord intended and will have minimal impact on the world. Whether by ignorance or willful disobedience, the people of Beaver Creek Baptist Church are not living in covenant community through small groups. Covenant people are not called to be just adequate. The church must be what God intended the church to be. Without covenant community the heart of the church is missing. This project will bring to light the heart of what is missing and propel the church to more fully represent the Body of Christ.

Definitions

With an ever-changing culture it is necessary to define a few terms that could be taken in a way different than they are intended. For this project, it is necessary to define biblical community, covenant, and small groups.

Biblical community. Biblical community is the body of Christ living to reflect the nature of God through biblical directive. We were created to live in community. Jesus made it possible for us to reflect the relational nature of God through life in the community.¹¹ In the context of the local church biblical faith forms a community of those who worship God, who share with one another a common experience of God's salvation and a common call to bear witness to God's salvation-creating power in the world.¹²

¹¹Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 34-35.

¹²David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. "community."

Whereas the Old Testament saw community change through the tribal period, the period of the monarchy and the exilic period, the post-Easter community envisaged itself in direct continuity with the ministry of Christ, being commissioned by him to carry on his work and having a concern to preserve his teaching and to hand down various traditions to subsequent generations.¹³ How the church functions in biblical community will be fleshed-out as the church works through the Scriptures.

Covenant. A covenant is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.¹⁴ As such, covenant is the instrument constituting the rule of God, and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community.¹⁵ In the case of a covenant initiated by God, E. Kutsch, Victor Hamilton,¹⁶ Anderson and Guernsey agreed in Hamilton's work that in the Bible a covenant is a relationship defined by God. It is God's "unilateral" word and action.¹⁷

Small groups. For this project, small groups are defined as groups where people have committed to walk together in life as small groups and these groups make-up the church as a whole. Small groups are characterized as "the lifeblood of the early church. Because life is an everyday occurrence, church should be as well."¹⁸ This quote

¹³Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), s.v. "community."

¹⁴Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 178.

¹⁵Freedman, "covenant."

¹⁶Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 319.

¹⁷Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2008), 37.

¹⁸Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010), 175.

gives a glimpse into the definition of small groups. In the church community as a whole, it is difficult to live in biblical community where members, “commit to and walk in relationship with one another”¹⁹ when there are so many people to interact with.

Limitations and Delimitations

The primary limitation of this project was that it was conducted in sixteen weeks. This project only allowed six weeks to see if changes made in small groups had any effect on biblical community within the small groups. That was only enough time to see changes begin however further monitoring will need to take place.

The primary delimitation for this project was to only work with adult small groups. Beaver Creek Baptist Church had four adult small groups during the time of this project. The decision to work only with adults was due to the short tenure of this project.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project was defined by the five goals stated. These goals were to (1) gather data related to the current understanding, the current practice and the current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups, (2) to lead members to a biblical understanding of community, and encourage them to participate in biblical community in small groups, (3) to train small group leaders, (4) to implement changes to bring small groups in line with the biblical understanding of community, and (5) to gather data to determine if growth had occurred. The completion of the goals was accomplished through a pre-survey, preaching series, teaching of small group leaders, implementation of new directives and a post-survey.

¹⁹ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 173.

Pre-Survey

The pre-survey was an anonymous survey to determine each adult participant's level of understanding, practice, and perceptions towards biblical community in small groups. From October 6, 2013, to March 30, 2014, Beaver Creek Baptist Church averaged 105 in active worship attendance. Of those 105, 64 percent, or an average 67 of the attendees were adults over the age of eighteen. The objective was for 80 percent of active adults to participate in the survey, which were 54 individuals. Each participant created a unique numerical identifier so that pre- and post-surveys could be compared for statistical analysis.

To get a deeper understanding of biblical community, adults were asked to identify themselves as a church leader or attendee. This requirement not only gave the picture of the church as a whole, but also distinguished between leaders and attendees. The survey was posted online with printed responses for those who did not have a computer or internet connection. For those who chose to do a paper survey, a designated representative entered the survey responses to the online data pool. The church provided computer time during the two-week data gathering period for participants to do their surveys, if they wish.

The survey consisted of three sections. The first section measured the participant's direct knowledge of biblical community. The second section measured the practice of biblical community by assessing the frequency of small group attendance, Bible study, fellowship, prayer, and ministry (service, caring, etc.) to the members of their small group. The third section measured each participant's general feelings towards participating in small groups.²⁰

²⁰See appendix 1, "Developing Biblical community through Small Groups Assessment Tool."

Treatment

The proposed treatment for this project was multi-layered. Goal 2 of the project utilized a six-week Sunday morning preaching series over specific biblical passages, teaching the truths of biblical community in small groups. Each week participants were given specific points to consider.

During that same six weeks, Goal 3 was launched where the pastor and the adult small group leaders met, reviewed the teaching of the week, evaluated their small groups in light of that biblical understanding, and created a priority list of changes for their small groups. Training covered covenant understanding, small groups during the time of Christ, community in small groups of the early church, and best practices of small groups that lead to community. While small group leaders were being trained on biblical community, they assessed their small groups' function, as well as their own leadership of those small groups and recommend needed changes to align their small groups with biblical guidelines. The training for small group leaders was one step in an ongoing process to equip small group leaders. Goals 2 and 3 ran concurrently for six weeks.

Once the preaching series and leadership training were completed, a plan was created that implemented changes in small groups.²¹ The changes were implemented in every adult small group. The goal was for adult participants to learn about biblical community in small groups and then those who had not participated in small group community would begin participating during the preaching series or soon after.

The final phase of the treatment was to lead small groups to operate in biblical community for approximately six weeks. Clearly the ultimate goal was for the groups to function in biblical community forever, but for this project, a six-week period of time had been chosen.

²¹No formal document was created. A list of suggested Best Practices was created and will be outlined in Chapter 5, Goal 3, Stage 3: Best Practices Establishment.

Post-Survey

The post-survey was conducted in weeks 15 and 16. Each participant took the same survey again, using their unique numerical identifier. The survey used a t-test for dependent samples format. The t-test for dependent samples involved comparison of means from each group of scores and focused on the difference between the scores. The null hypothesis stated that there is no difference between the means for the pretest and the posttest scores on the understanding and practice of biblical community.²² The survey tested whether or not the treatment provided enough progress to reject the null hypothesis. The survey indicated the difference between the two survey results, providing the obtained value. If the obtained value was greater than the critical value, then the treatment was a success.

The two surveys were dependent on each other to determine whether after the treatment, there was a significant difference in understanding and practice of biblical community.

²²Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 191-92.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR COMMUNITY IN SMALL GROUPS

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). From the beginning it was God who took the initiative to act. God took the initiative to create the cosmos and God took the initiative to create man. Man had a special relationship with God as Adam was created with the capacity and necessity for relating to God. The Divine made a creature with which He could interact.¹ God interacted with the man by giving him a place to “tend and keep.” However, it was not good for man to be alone so the Creator creates a helper for man, woman. So, man, woman and God interacted in the Garden. This was the first community between man and God. From this first community progressing to the establishment of covenants in the Old Testament and the establishment of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, God has ordained His people to function in biblical community.

God Established Community in the Old Testament through Covenant

Through the creation of the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9, the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15, and the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19, God established community in the Old Testament that laid the foundation for community in the New Testament through the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. These four covenants, along with the Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1-2 and the Covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7

¹Julie A. Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 29.

and Psalm 89 constitute the six major covenants of scripture.² These covenants stand alone as individual covenants, but also fit together as the backbone of the biblical narrative.³

Israel's relationship with God is most frequently seen in terms of covenant. There has been much discussion as to whether covenants are basically one-sided pledges or two-sided agreements.⁴ A covenant is a binding and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals to do or not to do specific things.⁵ Historically there have been many agreements that may have the form of a covenant but have not been called a covenant. For example, a marriage agreement, a legal contract between two parties, etc. Traditionally a covenant has been seen as a mutual relationship with reciprocal rights and duties. In the case of a covenant initiated by God, E. Kutsch, Victor Hamilton,⁶ Anderson and Guernsey would agree that in the Bible a covenant is a relationship defined by God. It is God's "unilateral" word and action.⁷ Historically, premillennialists recognize five or six covenants as "divinely initiated covenants". Classic Reform Theology, on the other hand, generally concludes that there is essentially one overarching covenant in Scripture

²Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 135.

³Ibid., 138.

⁴Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 178.

⁵Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2008), 38.

⁶Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 319.

⁷Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 37.

– the “covenant of grace.”⁸

For the course of this project the viewpoint that God initiates covenants to establish community will be the focus. Whether there are many covenants or the exact form of the covenants will not be the primary focus. The issue that covenants existed and why God formed them will be the focus. The covenants related to Noah, Abraham and Moses will be featured. In these covenants God established a means to separate His people from all the other people in the world. This separation brought with it a divine relationship and a divine responsibility. There were blessings to obey the covenant and cursing for disobeying the covenant.

Gentry and Wellum in their work, *Kingdom through Covenant*, lay out these four covenants and the significance each played.

God judged the entire human race and made a new start with Noah. This too ended up in chaos and evil. He made a fresh start with Abraham. He would restore a creation and humanity ruined by pride and rebellion by using Abraham and his family as a pilot project. The people of Israel would be an example, a light to the world of what it means to be properly related to God and to treat each other properly according to the dignity of our humanity. We may call this the Mosaic covenant. But the people of Israel did not keep the Mosaic covenant. This is why the biblical story ends up talking about a new covenant.⁹

Noahic Covenant

The first time the word covenant is used in the Bible is in the account of Noah in Genesis 6:1 – 9:17. The central theme is the wickedness of the human race.¹⁰ The text makes it clear that the problem leading to the flood was simply the wickedness of the human heart and the behavior that resulted. Hardly a better description of total depravity

⁸Irvin Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants: The Noahic and the Priestly Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 181.

⁹Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 138.

¹⁰Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 179.

can be given than “every inclination of the thoughts of the heart was only evil all the time.”¹¹ So God decides to destroy man and beast. The God of the Old Testament never acts arbitrarily. God is moved to anger by man’s deliberate violations of the code by which He wills His world to live.¹²

Noah on the other hand is blameless, righteous and walked with the Lord. He is living in community relationship with God in the midst of such great sin. What can be missed with Noah’s life example is the message of grace. By God’s grace Noah and his family were saved.¹³ This grace is formalized in a covenant. In this covenant there is tension between God and Noah. Can they count on each other? God, the maker of the covenant, obligates himself to keep self-imposed commitments. However, for these commitments to take place, Noah must continue as he has led a life of faithfulness to God and actually do what God has asked. Noah was obligated to God’s faithfulness as the narrator does not mention a rudder or navigational aids, suggesting that the fate of the Ark depends solely on the will of God.¹⁴ What is at stake is the salvation of all mankind. The God authored covenant cannot be fulfilled unless Noah is faithful. If Noah does not build the ark, then not only do Noah and his family members die, but all mankind as well and God’s purpose to crush the Serpent through the women’s seed.¹⁵

The major idea in the account of Noah is the establishment of an

¹¹John Walton, *Genesis: From Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 307.

¹²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 273.

¹³Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 179.

¹⁴Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 135.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 123.

unconditional, unilateral covenant. From this point on, the God of Israel would be known as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. These covenants had stipulations for the people and promises and signs from God.”¹⁶ For example, all living creatures are at humankind’s disposal for food, as long as the blood is not included; but God will make a covenant to protect all living creatures on the earth.¹⁷ This covenant does not depend on human obedience to the laws given to Noah; rather, men’s and women’s compliance with the laws will allow them to live and enjoy this covenant.¹⁸

Covenant essentially incorporates a legally binding obligation. In this case instead of a binding agreement between men, it is a binding agreement, initiated by God, between God and man. This covenant was not negotiated because men do not have parity with God. In the case of the covenant with Noah, God alone is obligated to keep the tenets of the covenant.¹⁹ God will maintain His special relationship with Noah. “I shall confirm my covenant with you” shows that Noah was already in a covenant with God. He is not simply a perfectly righteous man; there is a covenant between him and God.”²⁰

God was “grieved in His heart” over the great sin of His creation. The solution was to exercise God’s justice to destroy both man and beast. However, Noah has been living in community with God and through the covenant Noah and his family were saved. God initiated the covenant and God promised to keep the covenant with Noah. The

¹⁶Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 202.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁹Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” 184.

²⁰Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 175.

covenant 'set-aside' Noah and his family to live in covenant community with God. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow. This rainbow is a reminder to God (Gen 9:14-15) of the covenant He forged with Noah. Ultimately all mankind benefits from this covenant, but at its inception the goal was to establish a covenant relationship with Noah.

Abrahamic Covenant

Much like the covenant with Noah, the question of a covenant with Abraham is whether, in fact, Abraham can trust and if Yahweh, in fact, can be trusted.²¹ Abraham had recently experienced a victory in battle (Gen 14). Sometime after that battle God came to Abraham in a vision. God presented Himself in the beginning with an assurance for Abraham to, “not be afraid” and a confidence that God is his shield.²² This shield imagery was clearly a military metaphor offered to bring comfort and peace to Abram.²³ God was offering Abram a covenant with Himself. This covenant begins in Genesis 12:2-3 where God promised Abram he would be blessed and all families of the earth are blessed.²⁴ For that, God will bring great blessing to Abram and his family. In Genesis 15, God elaborates on the covenant. There are two main components to the covenant in this chapter; one is the promise of a biological son to produce many generations and two is God giving Abram’s descendants land.

Central to the entire chapter is the report of Abram’s belief in the Lord and the

²¹Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 304.

²²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 418.

²³Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 327.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 421.

Lord's crediting him with righteousness.²⁵ To believe someone is to accept what they say as true. To believe in someone goes beyond basic belief and into faith and trust. Abram's belief has nothing to do with salvation and nothing to do with a faith system. He simply believed that, though he had no children and no hope of having any, God could make his offspring as the star of the sky.²⁶ "The human partner counts on God to give him offspring, and the divine partner credits that faith as righteous. On that basis, the Lord grants Abraham his immutable covenant."²⁷

Genesis 15:6 should be seen as the premise on which the covenant is ratified. Because Abram takes God at his word, God credits him with a legacy on the basis of the rightness of this faith. He accomplishes this by formally establishing the covenant with him. Recognized righteousness becomes the basis for blessing.²⁸ God is establishing this covenant to be in relationship with Abram and subsequently for those who keep the covenant.

The second promise of the covenant is to give Abram and his descendants their land. This portion of the covenant Abram will not experience since it will come some 400 years later. The 400 hundred year prophecy is important. God shows Abram that there will be 400 years before the possession of the land. It will take time for the Amorites to fulfill their doom and God will judge them and Egypt as well. For Abram to see all this was horrible, but helpful. Abram and his descendents would know that such

²⁵Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 305.

²⁶Walton, *Genesis*, 421.

²⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 239.

²⁸Walton, *Genesis*, 422.

oppression and enslavement was not a threat to the fulfillment of the promise – it was of the divine plan.²⁹

The promise of God fulfilling His covenant comes in the vision of the sacrifice. God had him take the sacrifice animals, cut them in half and split them on the ground. Walking between the split halves was a sign of commitment to the covenant.³⁰ The predominant verb associated with covenant making is *karath*, “to cut.” The frequency of this phrase almost certainly owes its origins to the ancient practice in which parties ratifying a covenant would cut a sacrifice in pieces and then walk between them. So common was this practice that 1 Samuel 22:8 uses the term cut as a synonym for covenant making.³¹

Just like Noah lived righteously and was rewarded with the Noahic Covenant by the Lord, Abraham must walk before the Lord (living in fellowship with him and being taught by him) and be blameless (living with integrity) in order to enjoy the covenant blessings. In fact, only after Abraham shows his total commitment to the Lord by his willingness to offer up Isaac as sacrifice does God take an oath to fulfill this covenant (Gen 22:15-18).³²

Through the Noahic Covenant God invited Noah and his family into a covenant relationship with Him that saved Noah, his family and all mankind. Progressing to the Abrahamic Covenant God invited Abraham into a covenant relationship that set

²⁹Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 311.

³⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 423.

³¹Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” 178.

³²Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 263.

him aside and his descendant as the people of God and establishes Israel as God's chosen community. This covenant promise was reiterated from one generation to the next through the patriarchs.³³

Mosaic Covenant

The first verses of Exodus 19 suggest that the covenant with Moses is very much the act of Yahweh for which all else he has done has been preparatory and toward which all else has been moving.³⁴ The Noahic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant lead history to this point with Moses. There are differing opinions as to whether this is a new covenant or if the covenant with Moses is a progression from the Abrahamic Covenant. Douglas Stuart believes that their agreement would constitute a commitment in faith in advance,³⁵ and Brevard Childs would agree as Israel would learn shortly what God's will is to which she has committed herself.³⁶

Peter Enns and W. Dumbrell correctly argue that the reference to 'covenant' in Exodus 19:5 refers to what has gone before, namely the covenant with the patriarchs. Exodus 2:24-25, "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." Exodus is about God keeping a promise He made to Abraham. What is about to transpire is not a new covenant, but the continuation and deepening of an existing covenant.³⁷ The continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant to

³³Gorman, *Community That Is Christian*, 35.

³⁴John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 265.

³⁵Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2006), 422.

³⁶Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (1974; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1995), 367.

³⁷Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 387.

Moses is also hinted in Genesis 3:12 where God tells Moses, “I will certainly be with you.” God will be with Moses as he leads the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt.

Exodus 19:4-6 is a summary of the covenant. The whole covenant is spelled out in Exodus 20 through Leviticus 27:27. This summary passage provides an opportunity for God to challenge the Israelites to enter into covenant with Him. Their agreement would constitute a commitment to show their loyalty and gratitude by their obedience to the law.³⁸

This entire scene at the mountain and the subsequent laws are predicated on Exodus 19:4, what God has done. The Israelites are not keeping the law in order for God to save them. They have already been saved; God has brought them out of Egypt. It is what is expected of a people already redeemed. The people do not earn their salvation; but once saved, they are obligated to act in a manner worthy of their high calling.³⁹ However, Israel’s response to God to enter into covenant is voluntary. He does not force them to make it.⁴⁰

God is creator but His intention is to create for Himself a particular people. The covenant represents the separation of His chosen people from the general world population, the beginning of the outworking of his intention to bring close to Himself a people that will join Him for all eternity as adopted members of his family.⁴¹

The covenant with Noah saved Noah and his family and in effect, saved all generations to come to be in community with God. The covenant with Abraham set aside a specific group of people to be in community with Him. That covenant community was taken even further in covenant community with God through the Mosaic Covenant. These

³⁸Stuart, *Exodus*, 422.

³⁹Enns, *Exodus*, 387.

⁴⁰Durham, *Exodus*, 262.

⁴¹Stuart, *Exodus*, 422.

progressive covenants served to guide God's people in covenant community with God. There is however, a new covenant that will be the final covenant, through Jesus Christ.

The New Covenant

The covenant with Noah saved Noah and his family and in effect, saved all generations to come to be in community with God. The covenant with Abraham set aside a specific group of people to be in community with Him. That covenant community was taken even further in covenant community with God through the Mosaic Covenant. These progressive covenants served to guide God's people in covenant community with God. There is, however, a new covenant that will be the final covenant, through Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah 31

The first place, and the only direct place, a New Covenant is mentioned in the Old Testament is in Jeremiah 31; however, the ideas associated with it are frequently expressed.⁴² Jeremiah was a prophet of Yahweh. Prophets were basically preachers who addressed the social, political, and religious circumstances of their day with a word from Yahweh. Unfortunately, their message was almost entirely negative.⁴³ Their message is more of a threat than a prediction. In Jeremiah, the announcement of punishment is the part that deals with the future. Prophets like Jeremiah, would envision a time of renewal in the future, but it would only come after a time of punishment.⁴⁴ Jeremiah never said when the time of renewal or deliverance would come, he simply wrote "behold the days are coming."⁴⁵ However, the Israelites had confidence that it would come.

⁴²F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1993), 281.

⁴³Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 54.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁵Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 495.

In Jeremiah “covenant” is mentioned twenty-three times, referring mainly to the covenant at Sinai. This is important since the covenant at Sinai was binding upon God’s people. The Sinai Covenant or Mosaic Covenant was broken by Israel and Jeremiah is reminding his people of their sin. There were some who believed they were experiencing punishment for the sins of others, but in Jeremiah 31:29-30 he rejects their theology and insists on individual responsibility.⁴⁶ The nation may have sinned and been taken into captivity, but each person is responsible for the sin they have committed. This individual accountability as well as individual salvation becomes a central theme of the new covenant.

The broken covenant is the central theme of Jeremiah 11:1-7 where the curses outlined in Deuteronomy 27-30 are shown to be already in operation.⁴⁷ The foundational promise of the Sinai Covenant was that if they listened to God’s voice and did what he commanded, he would be with them to bless them as his own special people. In Jeremiah 11:8, Jeremiah says, “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart.” David Peterson in *Transformed by God*, comments, “As a nation, they needed to be circumcised to the Lord in their hearts. This teaching indicates that the physical rite of circumcision could never realize the purpose of the covenant if the heart remained foreign to it.”⁴⁸

How could a people with hard hearts internally obey an outwardly written covenant? No matter how many rites or practices the Israelites participate in, they will never be right with God. The fundamental cause of disobedience and idolatry is stubbornness of the human heart. The problem for Israel was that obedience was a

⁴⁶Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 279-81.

⁴⁷David G. Peterson, *Transformed by God: New Covenant Life and Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 19.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 20.

fundamental requirement for the covenant people. The Lord alone decides and makes known whether the covenant has been broken. The people repent of their sin, and the Lord alone decides whether to forgive.⁴⁹

The nation of Israel sinned before Yahweh. They broke the covenant they swore to keep and have been punished. Their punishment involved being taken captive and taken from their homeland, a homeland that God had promised and provided for them to inhabit. From 722BC to 587BC, Israel had been decimated and taken away. Jeremiah made these points clear leading up to what is called The Book of Consolation. The Book of Consolation consists of Jeremiah 30-33 and “stands as a refuge amid a storm of divine wrath that blows through the rest of Jeremiah.”⁵⁰ Israel is still experiencing suffering and oppression in the land of the enemy. This suffering and oppression are found to be judgment for their sin. To acknowledge this truth and to repent would be the logical response to the covenant.

Hope was integral to Jeremiah’s preaching. Judgment was never an end in itself but the means Yahweh used to bring Israel into a new and lasting relationship.⁵¹ But there is hope. By God’s grace, the route of the enemy advance will become the road for the exiles’ return.⁵² The return would be a gathering of Israel and Judah to return as one people. This return was for all Israel and Judah. It was for people of all stages and status of life. The image of the most vulnerable people returning underscores their need for the Lord to return. They will not return as an army, but as a people leaning on God. If even

⁴⁹Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 27 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 131.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

⁵¹J. A. Thompson, *A Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary On the Old Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 551.

⁵²Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 115.

the blind and lame will be brought back, then certainly everyone can be included.⁵³

Israel had agreed and come under covenant relationship with God. Israel sinned and suffered great national punishment for their sin. Jeremiah preaches that the day will come when Yahweh would bring them back together, destroy their oppressors and bring them under a new covenant that would not be written on stone but on their hearts. But is this new covenant completely new or is it connected to the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants?

There are those who believe the covenant Jeremiah envisions is not a brand new covenant, it is a renewed covenant. It involves the same partners, Yahweh and Israel and Judah. According to Steven McKenzie in *Covenant*, what is new is the reception of the new covenant on the part of the Israelites.⁵⁴ He came to this conclusion, since in his thought, covenants in the Hebrew bible did not replace the prior covenant therefore the new covenant is an extension of the old covenants not a completely new covenant.⁵⁵ Larry Richards in *Every Covenant and Promise in the Bible* believes that the New Covenant will replace the Mosaic Covenant but does not replace the Abrahamic Covenant. Since the Abrahamic Covenant is promised to all generations, it will not cease. The Mosaic Covenant had been brought to an end. Both the analogy to a broken marriage and the promise of a 'new' covenant make this point clear.⁵⁶ The New Covenant promises of forgiveness, intimate relationship with God, and inner transformation define how God intends to fulfill those promises.⁵⁷

It would seem that the covenants of the Old Testament appear to be

⁵³Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 113.

⁵⁴McKenzie, *Covenant*, 59.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁶Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 132.

⁵⁷Larry Richards, *Every Covenant and Promise in the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 71.

progressive as God moves His people into a loving relationship that ultimately culminates in a new covenant. Since Jeremiah doesn't say when the New Covenant would begin, the Mosaic Covenant would remain in effect, governing the lives of the people until the inauguration of the new one, which the incarnate Lord of the covenant declared would be at his crucifixion.⁵⁸ Sacrifice was the means by which the Noahic, Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants were established as legally binding. The New Covenant was to be established by a sacrifice as well. But the blood that formally instituted the New Covenant would not be that of a sacrificial animal. It would be the blood of God's son.⁵⁹

What Jesus was about to do, suffer and die for forgiveness of sins for all his followers was new in many ways, but it did not make sense apart from the background of God's dealings with Israel for years. Jesus stated He didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. He came to bring the law into its full intent.⁶⁰ Jesus taught his followers what this will look like through the teaching of the Passover. The Passover was an annual celebration of Israel's redemption from Egypt (Exod 12-13). With this redemption came the establishment of the covenant that was sealed with sacrificial blood (Exod 19-24). But with the death of Jesus an even greater act of redemption is accomplished, and from now on it is the covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus that believers look to as they anticipate the future coming of the kingdom of God.⁶¹

1 Corinthians 11, Matthew 26 and Luke 22

The Passover reminded the Israelites how they had been saved. They celebrated and in a sense relived the experience so all would remember. This present

⁵⁸Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 283.

⁵⁹Richards, *Every Covenant and Promise in the Bible*, 73.

⁶⁰McKenzie, *Covenant*, 95.

⁶¹Peterson, *Transformed by God*, 37.

generation was not the ones who experienced the Passover and the Exodus themselves. So Jesus gathered together his closest disciples and shared with them the Passover (Matt 26:17-25). As they were to complete the meal, Jesus instituted what is called The Lord's Supper (Matt 26: 26-30). The purpose of this was to teach his disciples how the New Covenant was now possible. Jesus would give His body and His blood as the seal and sign of the New Covenant.

The Lord's Supper is also accounted in Luke 22:14-23. Jesus interprets the character of the Passover meal as a foundational, covenant-making event.⁶² The meal was not just a meal. From the actual Passover itself, Israel began to obey God and walk their way into a covenant relationship with God. In Luke 22:20 the phrase, "covenant in my blood" clearly refers back to Jeremiah 31 but also is an allusion to Exodus 24:8. Exodus 24:8 refers to the covenant sacrifice and is interpreted as having been effective as an atoning sacrifice for the people by which they were brought into covenant with Yahweh. There is a relationship then drawn between the covenant sacrifice of Exodus 24:8 and the death of Jesus, so that Jesus' death is said to atone for the sins of the people and enable their participation in the renewed covenant of God.⁶³

As the church began to form, there became abuse surrounding the observance of the meal and the Lord's Supper. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, sets the record straight and reminds the believers why they observe the meal. The issue became abuse separating the rich and the poor as they were to eat the meal together. Paul doesn't object to the well-to-do enjoying a reasonable quantity or quality of food in the privacy of their own families. But in the church setting, their satiating themselves at the expense of the

⁶²Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 760.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 763.

have-nots proves inappropriate.⁶⁴ Paul criticizes them regarding the purpose to gather, eat and observe the Lord's Supper. Paul is clearly restating the teaching Jesus gave when he instituted the Lord's Supper as recorded in the Gospels. The ultimate purpose of the supper was to remember the death of Christ which was necessary for the forgiveness of sins.⁶⁵

Paul recites, "This is my body which is broken for you" in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" in 1 Corinthians 11:25. These are the building blocks for the foundation of the New Covenant. He then uses the phrase, "which is for you" that links the bread and the cup – both referring to Jesus' death.⁶⁶ The key here is the blood that is symbolized by the cup. The explicit description of the shed blood of Jesus Christ in this context as the new covenant in my blood demands, on one side, a serious pledge to all that the cross involves, but on the other side a full assurance of faith that follows from taking God at his word and trusting his promises. The New Covenant, through the body and blood of Jesus Christ, is the way of relationship with the Creator. It is the final covenant.

Hebrews 8-10

An explanation of the body and blood of Jesus Christ found in Hebrews 8-10, will give greater understanding of the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31. Hebrews is written to Christians who are struggling, transitioning from the old way (Old Covenant) to a new way (New Covenant). The believers are mixing old ways with new

⁶⁴Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 229.

⁶⁵Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 557.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 551.

ways.⁶⁷ Hebrews 8 - 10 works to clarify how things have changed.

The writer of Hebrews restates the prophecy from Jeremiah 31 which declares a new covenant is coming. The need for the New Covenant is due to the earthly nature of the former covenant, a covenant that held to elements that were ‘a shadow’ of things in the heavenly.

The earthly covenant relied on a high priest offering continual sacrifices for the sins of the nation. The new covenant would also have a high priest, a high priest that is not from an earthly line,⁶⁸ but from a heavenly line (Heb 7:11-28) who would offer a final sacrifice. The concept of the new covenant, coordinated with Christ’s priesthood, serves to show that it is not an isolated phenomena, but part of a total re-ordering by God of His dealings with His people.⁶⁹ Hebrews 8:6 says, “But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.”

Jesus’ role as high priest makes the new covenant superior since Jesus himself is the mediator as defined in 8:6.⁷⁰ As the mediator he is also the perfect “Atonemaker” because He equally conserves the interests of both parties of the covenant. He works to protect God’s honor and seeks the offenders to rescue and reclaim them.⁷¹ The new covenant is also better because it is founded on better promises. Ellingsworth would say

⁶⁷F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 180.

⁶⁸Ibid., 183.

⁶⁹Paul Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 409.

⁷⁰Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 185.

⁷¹Ibid., 186.

that the promises are better because they are heavenly and not earthly.⁷² However, F. F. Bruce would correctly contend that the better promises were stated in prophesy of Jeremiah 31:33-34, “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. . . . For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

The better promises of the new covenant were to have God’s law in your heart, obtain knowledge of God as personal experience and the blotting away of sins.⁷³ This is a clear change from the old way when in Deuteronomy 6:8 the law required Jews to “Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.” Under the old covenant Jews were to tie phylacteries, which contained parts of the books of the law, to their forehead and their hands. Now, they would possess God’s word in their hearts because they have changed hearts. This is just one example of the change from the old to the new.

Under the old covenant, Jews were directed to offer sacrifice for their sins. However, as Adam, Israel, Judah and others broke a covenant with God, what God really wanted more than sacrifice was to obtain a relationship, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

The promise of blotting out sins was the work of Christ, the mediator of the new covenant. As the High Priest to offer sacrifice for sins, He offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice. Hebrews 10:3 reminds that the sacrifices of the past were just annual reminders of sins. All sacrifices are given in terms of procuring atonement and the

⁷²Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 410.

⁷³Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 189.

removal of sins.⁷⁴

The new covenant initiated made the old covenant obsolete. Through Jesus Christ the High Priest, He offered the sacrifice once for sin. He offered Himself as that sacrifice. “And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (Heb 10:18).

In the life of the believer, there is now a big “therefore” in Hebrews 10:19. Therefore, since all of this is true regarding Jesus and the New Covenant, there is a call to persevere for all believers. As a result of the New Covenant a community is formed with relational implications. Hebrews 10:19-39 gives a glimpse into what life in the community of the believer would entail. These are not written as new laws to follow, but are to be a result of this new relationship.

The terms brothers and sisters give a sense of community. Those who believe together are a community of faith. We are to draw near to God. The implication is that everyone can draw near to God. Since the work of the high priest is complete, no high priest is needed to go to God on their behalf. Each person has a right of access⁷⁵ and can go to God, with confidence. This confidence should also manifest itself in maintaining hope before God and in a God who will do what He says.

Another manifestation of the new covenant in community is mutual consideration, a consideration to encourage one another to love each other and to participate in good works. Christian faith and witness will flourish more vigorously in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship.⁷⁶ It is a way to watch out for possible failures and

⁷⁴William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 79.

⁷⁵Ibid., 64.

⁷⁶Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 256.

weaknesses in the community to keep caring for one another.⁷⁷ Believers will fail to achieve these manifestations if an urgency of assembly to worship and fellowship do not exist.⁷⁸

Jesus Christ Modeled Small Group Covenant Community

After Jesus ascended into heaven as documented in Acts 1, the disciples set out to follow the teachings of Jesus. From the death of Jesus until Mark's gospel was written, bits and pieces of the story of Jesus had been circulated. Storytellers likely assembled this material to respond to the questions about why Jesus was executed and why communities that had gathered around the prophet continued to meet.⁷⁹ Centered on the teachings of Jesus, communities of believers began to form churches. Some of them were community groups that functioned within the Synagogue much like those who followed John. The function of the early church, especially as outlined in Acts, will be investigated shortly.

The foundational understanding is that once an individual professed faith in Jesus Christ and committed to follow Him believers were drawn to each other to experience and learn more about following Christ together. God calls those who become His people to be part of a community. So the new humanity that Christ is creating becomes visible in communities that have a quality of life that reflects Christ's example.⁸⁰ The New Covenant is found in Jesus. Jesus is the example of life to emulate. So what did the example of Christ, living in covenant community look like?

The defining principles that stand at the heart of Jesus' mission, and the

⁷⁷Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 526.

⁷⁸Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 66.

⁷⁹Ronald J. Allen, *The Life of Jesus for Today*, For Today Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 4.

⁸⁰Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 74.

community implications of that mission, emerge with particular clarity from a study of his inner circle, the precisely defined group of disciples of Jesus, those who were learners in relation to him as teacher and prophet.⁸¹ There was also an outer circle. The outer circle, were those who had repented and committed their lives to Christ, but didn't leave their regular lives to become part of the inner circle. They stayed where they were to welcome new believers and to live life as a believer.⁸²

The inner circle or the disciples of Jesus were individuals that Jesus called Himself to follow him. These were personal invitations. The call to belong to the very close circle of Jesus was a call to be and also to do. This relationship would be one-sided if they followed and witnessed only.⁸³ The inner circle was an example of covenant community, an agreement between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus, as the foundation of the New Covenant, offered God's Word in their hearts, a personal experience with Jesus and forgiveness for their sins. The disciples were to be faithful to follow Jesus. Mark 1:16-20 reveals the calling of the first disciples. Simon and Andrew were at work, fishing, when Jesus called them. They left their jobs and followed Jesus. A little ways further, James and John were also fishing when Jesus called them to follow Him. James and John left their profession, left their father and followed Jesus. This calling to follow Jesus placed family, work and money secondary to the call to follow.

As Jesus continued His public ministry twelve men were called to be with Jesus as the inner circle. For two or three years the inner circle had spent most of their time with Jesus either among outdoor crowds, in the temple or in private small-group discussions with him. There was always this harmonious small-group large-group

⁸¹David R. Catchpole, *Jesus People: The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), 61.

⁸²Ibid., 62.

⁸³Ibid., 67.

rhythm, the small group providing the intense, more accountable community life that gave depth to the larger-group gatherings.⁸⁴ This would be the small group where Jesus lived, taught, and participated in ministry together with the disciples. This would also be the small group where the disciples learned what it meant to follow Jesus, what it meant to serve over what it meant to rule. To follow Jesus is to place everything under the calling to the relationship with Christ. A couple examples of this type of submission are found in Matthew 6:33 where Jesus teaches to, “Seek first the kingdom of God” and Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Jesus is preaching the famous Sermon on the Mount. The crowds are huge and the inner circle of disciples was there. The teaching would reveal that when priorities regarding treasure in heaven and on earth are right, God will provide for fundamental human needs. Seeking first the righteousness of the kingdom implies obedience to all of Jesus’ commands. But when will these needs be met? Since Jesus is ruling out worry for the present age, would not it make sense that the provision of needs would come in this age as well? Where the provision would come from could refer to Luke 12:33, which presupposes the sharing of goods within the Christian community.⁸⁵ The language in this same passage of Luke 12 reflects Jesus’ evidence of the community. In Luke 12:32, (NIV) Jesus calls them “little flock.” A term here referring to the community of believers He is addressing.⁸⁶ Christians sharing their goods to help each other is a mark of biblical community. This can largely be done by individual churches for church members, but it can also be a mark of small group community as well.

⁸⁴Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 168.

⁸⁵Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 126.

⁸⁶Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing), 49.

Another teaching the small group needed to learn was what it meant to be a servant rather than a ruler. The Mark 10:45 passage indicates Jesus came to give His life a ransom for many. He is not implying that the disciples would be doing the same since only Jesus could give Himself as a ransom for lost humanity. However, some of the inner circle would ultimately give their lives for what they believe. The idea here is the spirit of service and self-sacrifice, the priority given to the needs of the many, are for all disciples. They, too, must serve rather than be served.⁸⁷

These are just a few examples of how Jesus lived in community with the inner circle of disciples. In John 17:4-8 (NIV), Jesus said He has completed the work the Father had given Him to do. However, Jesus had not been to the cross. But, it appears the work indicated here was to teach the inner-circle the words of God and then send them out to do the same. Jesus did this in the small-group community. Jesus fulfilled the mission of the Father through small group.

He was clearly involved with humanity in healing diseases, feeding thousands, teaching through encounters with religious leaders and many other opportunities. What it meant to 'be' in covenant community was to be a believer in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, to seek forgiveness for sins and commit to follow Him. All those who follow Christ were referred to as the Bride of Christ. The inner circle, are those whom Jesus chose and in whom He lived His life and invested in them. They were those who lived life with Jesus in a small group of covenant community.

As Christians united together they formed communities of believers under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, the groups were small. Eventually they would grow and see others come to faith, and the groups would grow larger. The dynamics of the larger

⁸⁷R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 421.

groups would be different when they were small. Increasing the church or group size reduces the density of social networks within a congregation resulting in less reinforcement for commitment, less efficient monitoring of behavior and a higher proportion of ‘free-riding’ members.⁸⁸ The community characteristics would diminish when the small group became a big group. However, Jesus lived in His small group of disciples. He always lived and functioned in His small group. The group members were committed to each other in relationship. These disciples would go on to lead the church and pioneer the faith. However the manifestations of covenant community were expressed in the small group of believers.

What it meant to “be” was in covenant community with the Savior. What it meant to “do” was what they experienced together in that community. They experienced life together. Hebrews 8-10 gave evidence of mutual consideration, encouragement to love each other, and participation in good works. Jesus modeled small group covenant community. Sometime after the departure of Jesus into heaven these covenant communities began to grow and take form into what are called churches, and in these churches their still remained a sense of small group covenant community.

The Early Church Established Community through Small Groups in Acts 2

Large-group worship and small-group community are basic, complementary structures.⁸⁹ As evidenced in Acts 2:42-47, the early church would gather for large-group gatherings and small-group community. The large-group gatherings represented the larger covenant community of believers. Initially they met in the temple courts, Acts 2:46 (NIV), “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts” because that is

⁸⁸Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, “A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations,” *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011): 102.

⁸⁹Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 167.

what they already did as a lifestyle. Not all gatherings were in the temple courts. Sometimes they met in larger homes and open-air places. Some examples would be found in Acts 1:13 where the list of people gathered was so large it would have to be a large home, and in Acts 12:12 when Peter was released from prison, the Scripture indicates a great number of people had gathered at the house of Mary to pray for his release. Open-air large-group gatherings were also common as in Acts 3:11 when the believers had gathered at Solomon's Colonnade and many had come to see and hear what was taking place.

An immediate move from the large-group experience to participation in a small-group community is indicated in the progression of Acts 2. Acts 2 begins with the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost. When the people around had trouble understanding what was taking place, Peter addresses them in a Spirit-filled message that culminates with about three thousand people being added to the church that day through baptism. Given this progression through Acts, baptism is something that should be done upon salvation and used to usher individuals into community life. Historians believe it would be possible to baptize that volume of new believers in Jerusalem in a few hours given that some 150 immersion pools are known to have existed. Given the belief that 120 disciples gathered at the time, and if each one baptized fifteen new converts, the task would be completed in a few hours.⁹⁰ Upon conversion and baptism, immediately Acts 2:42 gives direction to the small-group participation of those converts. This process shows the importance of small-group community life to the believer.

Acts 2:42-47 also indicates community small-groups met in homes. Given that early churches did not have their own buildings, they were relegated to meet in homes. Unless the homes were large, as indicated above the majority of homes were smaller and

⁹⁰Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1:994.

could only hold a small number of people. It was in these small-group communities where community life would occur.

Small-group community life consisted of teaching, fellowship, breaking bread together, and prayer. These are the fundamentals of the small-group community as outlined in Acts 2:42-47. These four fundamentals serve a specific purpose and heighten the sense of biblical community.

Teaching

The teaching of the apostles would focus on the centrality of Jesus and prepare community members to share in the new life and witness.⁹¹ This is indicated in the immediate participation of new believers in community life from Acts 2:41-42. There is a great need for Christians to speak God's word to each other. Believers need each other again and again when they become uncertain and discouraged.⁹² Luke gives examples of the apostle's teachings as they were directed towards outsiders, Acts 3:11-26; Acts 4:8-12 and Acts 5:29-32. In this reference to the apostles teaching, it is safe to assume that Luke was referring to the teachings of Jesus as outlined in the gospels. The apostle's teachings provided the historic link to Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:21-22) it is essential for Luke in emphasizing the continuity between the mission of Jesus and his Church.⁹³ Teaching can also be applied to what is referred to as discipleship. Discipleship is a process to lead believers to discipline their lives in the cause of Christ. In John 17:4-8 (NIV), Jesus says,

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the

⁹¹Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

⁹²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 102.

⁹³Keener, *Acts*, 1002.

words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

Jesus has not been crucified as yet, but He indicates He has completed the work the Father sent him to do. What is the work? His primary work was to come as the final sacrifice on the cross for humanity. But, it appears the work indicated here was to teach the inner-circle the words of God and then send them out to do the same. Jesus did this in the small-group community.⁹⁴ Teaching then is the sharing of the word of God in such a way as to keep Jesus in the center and to lead others to apply the word to live in the new covenant life with Christ.

Fellowship

Fellowship became the personal interactive character of relationships in the early church at all levels. The word for fellowship is *koinonia* and can also indicate a partnership referring to the sort of harmony created by shared purpose. Partnership included sharing profit and early Christians sometimes used the term *koinonia* to acknowledge a sharing with others (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13 and Heb 13:16). The sharing mentioned later in Acts 2:44-45 expands this notion further.⁹⁵

Breaking Bread Together

The breaking of bread refers to table fellowship, to eat together and to experience mutual acceptance in the community life. Some would say this is teaching the Lord's Supper as the breaking bread together element and the common meals are mentioned later in verse 46.⁹⁶ It is possible that is the case here and the later mention of eating in homes refers to eating a meal together. Whether this refers to the Lord's Supper

⁹⁴Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 20.

⁹⁵Keener, *Acts*, 1003,

⁹⁶F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 24.

or not, the intension would seem that the small-group is where the intimate meals were eaten and there was also a practice of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus in the small groups as well. It also may be that a common meal and the Lord's Supper were done at the same time. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, Paul writes to criticize the church because when they gather to eat and practice the Lord's Supper, some have taken the event to an unhealthy manner. The rich would eat to excess and humiliate the poor. It became an abuse of both forms of meals.

Prayer

Through prayer the community seeks God's direction and is dependent upon God because God's family of people, do not work by feelings or intuition, but actively submitting themselves to the Lord's direction.⁹⁷ Early believers were given to reciting wrote prayers that they had always prayed in the temple, but were also now given new dimensions to praying to the God they are experiencing in a personal way.

The entire passage of Acts 2:42-47 stresses the solid community start the earliest church enjoyed. It still reflected its Jewish context, going to temple, but, beyond that, gathered in homes for small-group community life.

One key aspect that must not be missed would be the phrase, "They devoted themselves". To become a believer and follower of Jesus Christ is a choice, "those who accepted his message," Acts 2:41. Once that had been done, there is a choice to be devoted to participate in this form of small-group community. These foundations of small-group community do not happen by accident. They do not produce fruit if only done half-hearted or only during Christmas and Easter or in the case of the early believers during the festivals only.

Acts 2:47 indicates a response to living in small-group community. Believers

⁹⁷Bock, *Acts*, 150.

lived small-group community life with glad and sincere hearts. Those outside the community recognized the attitude of joy and were drawn to it. Hebrews 14:17-18 sheds some light when it indicates that if believers serve Christ in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, they will be pleasing to God and receive human approval.

There was always this harmonious small-group, large-group rhythm, the small group providing the intense, more accountable community life that gave depth to the larger-group gatherings. The early Christian community outlined in Acts 2:42-47 provided a foundational model for small group community.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL/PRACTICAL ISSUES IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Chapter 2 covered the belief that God established community with His people in the Old Testament through covenants. In the New Testament God established the relationship between Him and His creation through a covenant in Jesus Christ. This understanding goes beyond the nature of the covenant to the very fabric of how God created. Ingrained in the very nature of mankind is the desire for community. Beginning with Adam and Eve, we see an initial community designed to be between mankind and the Creator.

Humanity Has a Desire to Live in Community

Adam and Eve's close community with God changed when they sinned. Sin separated them in relationship from their Creator, and their sin brought upon them, and humanity, a curse. Through the series of covenants that were examined in the previous chapter; the covenant with Noah, Abraham, and Moses; God formed the boundaries for relationship with His creation. God would fulfill His role, and those within the covenant with God were to fulfill their covenant roles. Sin however, would always break the covenant relationship, and God would move humanity towards another covenant.

The final covenant is the covenant through Jesus Christ. Because of the sin of mankind, a Savior was needed. Like the covenants of Noah, Abraham, and Moses, this covenant was also sealed with blood, the blood of the Savior, Jesus. Those who choose to participate in the new covenant through Jesus Christ find salvation and an inheritance in heaven.

Mankind was created with an ingrained desire for community. Sin distorts that sense of community, and mankind looks for other ways to fulfill that desire for community without a Savior. The rest of this chapter will examine the ingrained sense of community in mankind, take a brief look at substitutes for community that ignore the Creator, examine a sociological perspective on small groups, and discuss the practices of the early church and how those practices produce best practices for the contemporary church.

The Image of God as Community

From the beginning of time, man was created with social instincts. This instinctive nature for cooperation is the very hallmark of humanity and is what sets mankind apart from the animals.¹ A sense of cooperation is also known as an embedded sense of community, the very fabric of mankind, was created in the image of God.²

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27 NIV)

The resemblance in the image of God is found in man's need for companionship with the woman. Man was created a social being. In this way humans reflect God who exists not as a solitary being but as a being of fellowship. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in community together. They are social.³ We exist as a living reflection of God who exists in eternal community.⁴

¹M. K. Smith, "Community," in the *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.infed.org/community/community.htm>.

²Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 34.

³Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 14.

⁴House, *Community*, 34.

Just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live in a three-fold community relationship, so too does mankind live in a three-fold community relationship. Mankind is in relationship with God, with each other and with nature. Each of these relationships is significant.⁵ This project will only address the community relationship of mankind to God and to each other.

Mankind was created for community. Choosing a life outside of community without God denies being created in the image of God, and this is where things get messy.⁶ Adam and Eve were created in the image of God to have fellowship together like the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since Jesus is the incarnation of God, we learn what the image of God is by looking to Jesus. Therefore, the fellowship we desire and were created for is found in Christ. Only through Jesus can mankind find forgiveness for sin and restoration from isolation back to community.

Substitutes for Community

Sin brings isolation from God and disrupts the community relationship with the Creator. Mankind feels alone, so it looks for other ways to fill that need for community and belonging. Mankind tries to rebuild community through initiating social actions, running campaigns, planning better cities, or revitalizing schools. Some join gangs or social clubs, immerse themselves in virtual communities online, or hang-out at coffee shops. These are all attempts to satisfy the need for community, but the problem is none of these solutions address the real problem – isolation from God.⁷ Isolation is a result of sin separating mankind from its Creator.

⁵Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 80.

⁶House, *Community*, 32.

⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

Modernism dissolved the unity of social community by championing the individual, creating Individualism. Individualism is being replaced by a global, linked world system. As the individual tries to define himself again, social interaction has become foundational in the reconstruction of personal identity.⁸ However, as mankind works through social interaction to find personal identity, it is moving to community apart from the Creator of community.

Humanist Community, Harvard University. Examples of community without the Creator can be found in many places around the world. One such community was started by Greg Epstein, the Humanist Chaplain for Harvard University in 2013. Chaplain Epstein's community is called the Humanist Community. Leaders of the Humanist Community are shaping their Sunday meetings to resemble a traditional religious service. The look and the feel are like any other church on a given Sunday morning. However, there is no mention of God. When asked what the group was trying to accomplish, Chaplain Epstein said, "We decided we want to use the word congregation more and more often because that is a word that strongly evokes a certain kind of community – a really close knit, strong community that can make strong change happen in the world."⁹

This group is trying to create the community without the Creator. They are searching for it because they were created with the desire and need for community. However, lasting community can be found only in Christ.

Sunday Assembly, North London, England. The Sunday Assembly is an atheist group attended mainly by young, white, middle class people. The group members

⁸Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, ed., *Social Approaches to Communication*, The Guilford Communication Series (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 122.

⁹Dan Merica, "Church without God – by design," CNN, June 22, 2013, accessed June 28, 2013, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/22/church-without-god-by-design/>.

have been looking for something since they abandoned their Christian faith and stopped attending church on Sunday mornings. One individual said of the gathering, “It’s not a church. It’s a congregation of unreligious people.” Another attendee, Gintare Karalyte says, “I think people need that sense of connectedness because everyone is so singular right now, and to be part of something, and to feel like you are part of something. That’s what people are craving in the world.”¹⁰

People crave community because mankind was created for community. People search for belonging without knowing why it is part of the image of God.

Small Group Theory

While community can be found in large gatherings, there is also a desire for community that can only be found in small groups. By studying human practices, researchers have learned that humans need small groups for survival, support, emotional strength, and stimulation.¹¹ These are the unmet needs that humans are looking to satisfy.

Small group community is difficult to define and can be hard to explain given there a number of different small group theories. Michael Salwen and Don Stacks in their edited work, *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, and Steven A. Beebe and John T. Masterson in *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*, seek to explain and predict small group phenomena through five primary theories. Because these theories are outcomes of research, and have been shown to be applicable to understanding small group interaction, communication theory has given a glimpse into helping explain small group interaction. When talking about specific communication theories, it is not either / or, good or bad, weak or strong. Instead, these

¹⁰Brian Wheeler, “What Happens at an Atheist Church?” BBC, February 4, 2013, accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21319945>.

¹¹Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book On Small Groups*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 10.

distinctions should be seen as continua that range from very useful at one end to not particularly useful at the other end.¹² This has given indication of the limitations of communication theory, but it also speaks to legitimacy as well. Theories are only as good as they are useful in helping to explain the situation being examined. In this case, the situation was small group interaction.

Before reviewing the five small group theories it would be helpful to consider the objective of considering communication theory. Communication is the process by which people create, sustain, and manage meaning. It is in this process that we produce our personal relationships – it is how we plan, control, manage, persuade, understand, love, and so on.¹³ Theory at its most basic level provided us with a lens by which to view the world. Theories simply provide an abstract understanding of the communication process. As an abstract understanding, they move beyond describing a single event by providing a means by which all such events can be understood.¹⁴ Therefore, communication theory is understood as any systematic summary about the nature of the communication process.

Theories are just that theories, and are not comprehensive. Theories can illuminate an aspect of communication so that you understand the process more clearly, but also can hide things or distort the relative importance of things.¹⁵ One of the strengths of theories is that they account for choice in communication behaviors. We are not controlled by external laws instead we develop rules to help facilitate, and understand our

¹²Marianne Dainton and Elaine D. Zelle, *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life: A Practical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 6.

¹³Ibid., 2.

¹⁴Ibid., 3.

¹⁵Ibid., 4.

interactions, while at the same time not being bound to abide by these rules. Theoretical rules guide our interactions, but we have flexibility.

The primary weakness of communication theories is that they cannot fully predict behavior. People are different and these same theories often do not apply to other cultures. Given the complexity of human behavior, no theory can account for every behavior or interaction. This means that any time you say a communication process usually works, or that a specific approach is generally effective, or that certain types of communication are typical for particular organizations, you are in essence providing a theoretical approach.¹⁶

This project dealt with small groups in biblical community, therefore a brief statement on the impact of secular principles on biblical understanding is in order. Christians cannot take any secular approach, theory, or understanding, and blindly apply it to biblical or Christian organizations and practices. The Bible teaches that Christians are to look to God's word for truth. It is through biblical truth that we come to understand the complexities of small group life and gain confidence in the path of interaction. Second Timothy 3:16 sums-up how believers should see God's word as it relates to life, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." Principles of small group theory and communication theory should be taken with a grain of salt. These theories can shed light on small group interaction, but do not rise to the same level of confidence as the biblical record itself. They are merely a lens by which we can see and hopefully come to a deeper understanding of small group interactions.

If God created mankind to live in community, and these small group theories are applicable, there should be evidence of these small group theories in biblical history.

¹⁶Dainton and Zelle, *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life*, 4.

Part of the discussion on small group theories will also provide an example of each theory operating in biblical history.

Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory holds that groups remain attractive to their members as long as the rewards of the group membership exceed the costs.¹⁷ Rewards include fellowship, job satisfaction, achievement, status, and personal need fulfillment; while some of the costs may include frustration, mental effort, anxiety, and embarrassment. As long as rewards outweigh costs, individuals will stay invested in the small group community.

In a broad perspective, salvation and a relationship with the Father can be seen in the Social Exchange Theory. The large group of Christians known as the bride of Christ and the large group community known as the local church participate in a relationship where people weigh the cost and rewards of the relationship. The costs of a relationship with God may be persecution, trials, etc., but the reward is to be fulfilled in a relationship with God.

In a small group example, when the Jews were taken captive and taken to Babylon, there were four individuals who were selected to go into training and ultimately serve the king. They were Daniel, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan 1:7-21). The chief of the eunuchs gave them the Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. As a group they were to be tested in the eating of vegetables instead of the king's food. They participated in the food challenge together. In Daniel 2, Daniel was challenged to interpret the king's dream; Daniel went home, shared the task with his friends, and then sought the Lord together for an answer. God answered the group's prayer. In Daniel 3, Daniel's Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego were challenged to

¹⁷Steven A. Beebe and John T. Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*, 9th ed. (Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2009), 38.

worship the king, but they would not. Rather than worship the king or abandon each other, the group stayed together and was cast into the fiery furnace. God protected the group, and they walked out of the furnace. The potential cost of death in the furnace was not great enough to separate the group from God or from each other.

This is a biblical example of Social Exchange Theory. For this group of friends, the rewards outweighed the costs.

Rules Theory. Rules Theory states that for successful community to take place, group members must share easy-to-follow, prescriptive rules that structure their interaction.¹⁸ People want to know the group norms; as long as participants work within those norms, everyone gets along. Understanding Rules Theory and its application to small groups encourages productive norms and avoids those that are dysfunctional.

In a large group reference, all the covenant arrangements with God and His people can be seen in terms of Rules Theory. For example, the Ten Commandments of the Mosaic Covenant outlined the behavior and life practices the Israelites were to follow. The rules applied to the nation as a whole (large group) and to all groups of individuals within the nation (small group).

One example can be found in Acts 6:1-7. The apostles were praying, studying and preaching the word as well as caring for the widows. There became an issue with one group believing their widows were being neglected. Today, this passage is the foundation for deacon ministry. For this discussion, the seven chosen will be referred to as deacons. Ultimately there was a decision to call deacons to serve the widows and the apostles would focus on prayer and ministry of the Word. The process was completed and the apostles followed the rule for them which were to focus on prayer and ministry of the

¹⁸Beebe and Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups*, 42.

Word. The new rule for the deacons was for them to focus on taking care of the widows in the daily distribution of food.

The norm had become unproductive and dysfunctional. Through the establishment of new rules for the apostles and the deacons, the process became productive and functional as indicated in Acts 6:7, “So the Word of God spread.”

Systems Theory. Systems Theory sees the small group as an open system composed of interdependent elements that receives input, processes the input, and yields an output.¹⁹ Small group participants gain a sense of security as they sense a system, whether explicit or implicit, in which they can interact.

For Jesus and His disciples, the system was for Jesus to teach, the disciples to process, and understand, then to follow the teachings of the Master. One such example is an exchange between Jesus and the disciples in John 13:1-17. On this occasion Jesus washes the disciples’ feet. The input is Jesus teaching through his example and explanation. Like a servant, Jesus puts on a towel and washes the feet of the disciples. This is a function that is normally done by a servant, and not by the head of the house or master. The disciples process the input, seen in the words of Simon Peter when he asks, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus explains saying, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Jesus explains they should have a readiness to perform the lowliest service for one another.²⁰ The output is for them to go and willingly perform lowly acts of service.

Jesus taught – input. Simon Peter pushed back through questions – process. The disciples were to go do the same – output. This is how the open system functioned with Jesus and His disciples.

¹⁹ Beebe and Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups*, 51.

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 551.

Symbolic Convergence Theory. Symbolic Convergence Theory unites members together in a group consciousness and identity through the sharing of fantasies or stories, often chained together with a common theme.²¹ This can better be understood as the ‘inside joke’ or shared experience to unite them as a group. A fantasy, story or experience has been shared and provides a group psychological need, but has succeeded in bringing the group together.²² The group converges based on an agreed and shared symbolic meaning of the stories.

There are many examples of Symbolic Convergence Theory in the Bible. One example can be found in John 20:19-29. Jesus had been crucified and had risen from the dead. On the evening of the resurrection day, the disciples were together. With the loss the group experienced in the crucifixion of Jesus, the group comes together. In this passage, Jesus appears to them to show them his wounds to convince them it is Him.²³ The experience of seeing Jesus after the crucifixion and seeing his wounds sets this group apart as the only ones who have had this experience. This is demonstrated in John 20:24-29 where the disciples who had seen Jesus interact with Thomas. Thomas was not with them at the first appearing and therefore did not have the unifying experience. Jesus comes again, and Thomas sees and touches the wounds of Jesus, thereby experiencing that which brings him into the group of the disciples who had been with Jesus the week before.

God’s intention was for specific individuals to experience Jesus after the resurrection, and to converge based on this experience. In Acts 10:39-41, Peter makes mention of the experience when he says, “He was not seen by all the people, but by

²¹Beebe and Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups*, 64.

²²Michael Brian Salwen and Don W. Stacks, eds., *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Leas Communication Series (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996), 373.

²³Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 745.

witnesses whom God had already chosen.” Clearly for Peter, the experience with Jesus set him apart as part of a select group.

In the local church environment, the Symbolic Convergence Theory can be seen in the relationship of members of the same mission team. A mission team from this author’s church went to Peru. On one occasion something happened that brought the team together as the shared story was remembered. One team member named Matt had a face-to-face encounter with a goat. After the goat made its normal sound the goat sound was transferred to the team member’s name. So when any member of that mission team says the name Matt like a goat (Maaattt), those who were on the mission trip will laugh.

Structuration Theory. Structuration Theory helps explain why and how groups develop rules and behavior patterns.²⁴ Generally, small groups are part of a larger structure. Therefore, small groups function within the context of that larger framework. This relationship then provides the systems properties of the small group. For example, by definition a small group is only designated a small group because it is a part of the larger group. The church would be the larger group and the small group would be a smaller, sub-set of the church. While churches may be structured differently, a traditional Southern Baptist Church will usually be structured with a corporate worship experience and small groups designated as Sunday school classes which meet on Sunday morning. A contemporary style church will also have a corporate worship experience, but their small groups function in a different manner. Those small groups still exist within the larger church, but have more freedom on when each group meets and the way each group functions. Why each group develops the rules and behaviors they practice and how they develop those rules is directly related to the structure of the larger church organization.

²⁴Beebe and Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups*, 68.

An example of this theory can be seen in the reference to the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem became the mother church for churches. In Acts 11 there is a report of Peter being called back to the mother church in Jerusalem to give an account of his behavior in eating with and sharing the gospel with a Gentile. This gives evidence of the potential church government at the time.²⁵ The churches that had been created by believers scattered due to persecution are going to take their cues from this circumstance with Peter and the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:19-21). The new rule is that not only can Jews be saved, but so can Gentiles. This structure will now be passed-down to other churches to practice. Why the group has a new rule to share the gospel with Gentiles is due to the Jerusalem church's acceptance. In a nutshell, the structure is determined by the mother church in Jerusalem and then passed down to other churches to embrace. How this is fleshed-out is the Structuration Theory of why and how this larger context is developed.

All of these theories provide insight into some aspect of small group community and attempt to explain and predict small group phenomena. The need and the desire for small group community are clearly indicated from creation and from research. Given that mankind has been created in the image of God to fellowship in community and has pursued the fulfillment of community apart from the One who created them, man will never experience pure community relationships while isolated from the Creator. Because of sin, mankind sees no need for God.

Early Church Objectives and Contemporary Practices

The answer to the fulfillment of an imbedded desire for community is to seek biblical community through a relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and then live in

²⁵Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1817.

community with other Christians. What this community life looks like has changed through the years, but one thing is certain: the fullest experience of biblical community is found in a small group of believers. The author has been a Christian for thirty-eight years and has served on church staff for thirty years. In all those years of experience, small groups in a traditional Southern Baptist Church have been centered on Sunday school classes. The classes were generally small in size, studied the Bible, and met the interests of the other class members at times. Some of the classes were limited to just prayer and study with no concern or care for each other outside of the classroom environment.

Although this model of classroom-focused small groups has been around for a long time, the vision of small groups is changing. Philip Nation, Director of Adult Ministry Publishing for Lifeway Christian Resources, sees seven changes in the future:

1. Concept: Shift from 1 hour to 1 week.
2. Framework: Shift from organization to leadership development.
3. Involvement: Shift from caste to freedom.
4. Type: Shift from type to community.
5. Perspective: Shift from meeting to ministry.
6. Reason: Shift from teaching to transformation.
7. Goal: Shift from gathering to scattering.²⁶

All of these shifts give an understanding that small group community is more than an hour of weekly Bible study. If mankind is truly created with a desire to fulfill community, then community fulfillment cannot be accomplished in a neatly packaged, one-hour timeslot on Sunday morning. There is even a shift in pastoral involvement. Historically many pastors stay in their office during Sunday school, spending time preparing for the morning message. Pat Hood, senior pastor of LifePoint Church in Tennessee was asked by a staff member, “Do you expect our staff to be in a small group?” Pastor Hood replied, “If we are going to see people grow in community and be disciplined and if this is an important next step for people who attend our church, then yes,

²⁶Philip Nation, “7 Shifts for Small Group Ministry,” *PhilipNation.net*, August 27, 2013, accessed January 8, 2014, <http://philipnation.net/2013/08/7-shifts-for-small-group-ministry/>.

all of us have to be in a small group.”²⁷ If we are all created with a desire for community, then that same desire is in the pastor as well.

Jesus on Small Group Community

These shifts or changes in biblical community in small group emphasize the purpose of small groups, rather than the specific functions performed. Small groups should not be defined by what size they are, when they meet, what they produce, or what they study; instead they should be defined by the objectives of what they aim to accomplish.²⁸ Practically speaking, Jesus provides the objective of small group community. Jesus’ method of small group discipleship changed from person-to-person and from situation-to-situation.²⁹ The work of Jesus outlined in John 17:4-8 (NIV), was to teach the inner-circle the words of God and then send them out to do the same. Jesus did this in the small-group community, fulfilling the mission of the Father through a small group.

Jesus was involved with humanity in healing diseases, feeding thousands, teaching through encounters with religious leaders, and many other opportunities as examples of large-group community. What it meant to ‘be’ in covenant community was to be a believer in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, to seek forgiveness for sins and to follow Him. The foundational element of small-group community life for Jesus was discipleship.

²⁷Eddie Mosley, *Connecting in Communities: Understanding the Dynamics of Small Groups* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2011), 47.

²⁸Mosley, *Connecting in Communities*, 36.

²⁹Heather Zempel, *Community Is Messy: The Perils and Promise of Small Group Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 51.

Small Group Objectives

After Christ ascended to the Father, groups continued to meet and worship God. Small groups had formed and began to establish a foundation to continue. Many of these small groups grew to become large bodies of believers, but the heart of the Christian life remained the small group. Acts 2:42-47 has become the primary biblical focus for small group ministry. Throughout history there have been many interpretations of this pivotal passage. Looking at the basics of the passage there are five objectives of small groups (1) teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) breaking of bread, (4) prayer and (5) mutual care.³⁰ Each of these objectives is important to the life of a small group.

Steve Gladen, Pastor of the Small Group Community at Saddleback Church, has taken this passage and outlined five objectives or purposes of small groups. For Gladen they are (1) fellowship, (2) discipleship, (3) ministry, (4) evangelism, and (5) worship.³¹ The application of small group objectives will be reviewed later.

While serving as community group's pastor at Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Brad House utilized the Acts 2:42-47 passage and outlined seven objectives or community elements. They are (1) Bible study, (2) confession and repentance, (3) worship, (4) prayer, (5) hospitality, (6) exercise of Spiritual gifts, and (7) mission.³²

While small group objectives may be called by many different names, such as purposes or community elements, they all point back to the basics of biblical community in small group life. These objectives should be used to guide any small group community in a Bible-believing church. How these objectives are put into practice is something that should be cultural, not methodological. What works for a church in California may not

³⁰Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

³¹Steve Gladen, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 35.

³²House, *Community*, 101-3.

work for a church in rural Alabama. People all have the same innate desire for community, but how that is applied to a specific church is filtered through the culture of the church and the community.

Objectives Applied

So how do churches take the objectives of Acts 2:42-47 and give them form and shape for the church today?

The Central Texas Megachurch. In 2010, Kevin Dougherty of Baylor University published a research study that looked at the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey, along with a recent study of an unnamed church to be referred to as The Central Texas Megachurch (CTM). CTM promotes small groups as the basic building block of the church. The purposes of the groups are personal growth, evangelism and facilitation of community. To accomplish these purposes small groups are comprised of eight to fifteen adults in homogeneous groups who gather to sing, receive instruction, discuss, and pray. Each group has two leaders who meet monthly with other leaders for encouragement and accountability. The entire small group ministry has pastoral oversight.³³ This process of small group community has produced quantifiable results. Small group involvement produced greater involvement in the church programs, increased giving, produced active attendance, and developed more close friendships.³⁴ Using the basics of Acts 2:42-47 CTM established practices for a small groups ministry that produced results.

Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea. The largest church in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. This mega church of over 800,000

³³Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, "A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations," *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2011): 91-111.

³⁴Ibid., 94.

organizes cell groups of five to ten families to provide an intimate setting for Bible study, discussion and prayer. When asked how the cell group structure fits into the program of the church, Pastor David Cho said, “The cell group ‘is’ the program of the church.”³⁵

First Baptist of Jacksonville. “Discipleship in Relationships” is the theme for small group ministry, called LifeGroups at First Baptist of Jacksonville, Jacksonville, North Carolina. Ryan Hearn, Groups and Community Care Pastor utilizes Acts 2:42-47 as the first training passage for LifeGroup leaders, a passage considered the heartbeat of biblical community for the church.

FBC Jacksonville has shifted from a traditional Sunday School ministry to a small group structure that focuses on teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. Pastor Hearn indicated the church focuses on these primary four basics from Acts 2:42-47, but “if other ministry basics happen that is alright.”³⁶

This paper does not debate the number or forms of biblical covenants. This paper also doesn’t debate how many “basics” must be represented in each small group or the structure of each small group, but that the small groups do exist and employ as many of the small group basics as culturally and biblically relevant. The application of basics for small groups is cultural. Where First Baptist of Jacksonville leans heavily on apostles teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, Saddleback Community Church in California translates the Acts 2:42-47 passage into five basics; fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism and worship. The contention of this author is that the basic objectives from Acts 2:42-47 should exist, but how the basics are practiced may be different from place to place.

³⁵Dougherty and Whitehead, *A Place to Belong*, 95.

³⁶Ryan Hearn, telephone interview by author, September 9, 2014.

There are other functional issues that can be addressed related to small groups. Some of those issues would include whether only believers attend small groups or whether non-believers attend as well. Should small groups serve food? What about the study material? These and other practices will be addressed in the following section as a closer investigation is given to the basics of small group life. There were a dozen churches contacted where information was requested concerning small groups. Three churches responded to the request for information regarding small groups, and those three churches were studied in detail to document best practices for small group community life. The churches are; Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington,³⁷ LifePoint Church, Lewis Center, Ohio,³⁸ and First Baptist Jacksonville, Jacksonville, North Carolina.³⁹

Seven Basics from Acts 2:42-47

In considering the best practices for small group community basics from Acts 2:42-47, seven applications can be noted. Given that the application of biblical truth may be applied differently in different cultures, churches should have some form of these seven basics, but they may implement them differently. When small groups are established it is important to have a clear purpose for the groups and apply the seven basics as fits the purpose of the group. With that in mind, each small group may not exhibit every basic.

Meeting together in a small group. The early disciples devoted themselves to community practices (Acts 2:42). To experience biblical community in small groups,

³⁷All information related to Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, and their practices in small group ministry was received in an email correspondence from the church on October 8, 2014.

³⁸All information related to LifePoint Church, Lewis Center, Ohio, and their practices in small group ministry was received in an email correspondence from Troy Palermo, Executive pastor, on October 1, 2014.

³⁹All information related to First Baptist Church Jacksonville, Jacksonville, Ohio, and their practices in small group ministry was received in an email correspondence from Ryan Hearn, Groups and Community Care pastor on September 30, 2014.

there must be active participation. In a 2008 sample of mega-church attendees, sixty-percent indicated participation in a small group for prayer and Bible study.⁴⁰ Devotion requires a commitment to the task and not simply a half-hearted attempt to participate occasionally. Conversion of an individual is just the beginning and not the only element in biblical community. Conversion alone without integration into the life of a community is sometimes difficult to sustain a faithful Christian life. Just because many “received the Word” in Acts 2:41, it did not guarantee perseverance.⁴¹ Acts 2 does not indicate the young believers were required to participate in church. There was an immediate, regular follow-through care of the first converts in the early church. “Devoted” is the same word used in connection with the persistent devotion of the disciples to prayer in 1:14. The meaning is that they continued in faithful adherence to the newly formed community.⁴²

LifePoint, Mars Hill and FBC Jax did not indicate an intentional description of devotion other than they encourage and work to motivate people to be involved in community life through small groups. LifePoint and FBC Jax both have approximately one thousand adults in small groups.

Study the Bible together. The early disciples were devoted to the apostles teaching,” (Acts 2:42). The foundation of any small group that wants to realize community with the Creator and each other must be grounded in the study of the Bible together. The Bible is the foundation of belief, and practice and must be at the center of all the group studies. The teaching of the apostles would focus on the centrality of Jesus, and prepare community members to share in the new life and witness. The teaching of the

⁴⁰Dougherty and Whitehead, *A Place to Belong*, 96.

⁴¹Keener, *Acts*, 991.

⁴²Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 119.

apostles focused on two tracks.⁴³ One teaching track would be more expositional. An example of this teaching can be found in Acts 15:21 (NIV), “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city.” The second track was the proclamation or evangelistic preaching. This teaching was evidenced in Acts 13:12 (NIV), “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.”

The best practice for today to be devoted to a teaching is to be devoted to the teaching of the Bible. There are two prevailing practices of the churches surveyed. Mars Hill Church follows a study prepared from the preaching series of the pastor. The midweek small group would get a discussion guide based on the pastor’s message. LifePoint Church allows the groups to choose their own material however the group is given a few options from the church. FBC Jax practices both options; some groups follow the preacher’s message series, and some groups choose a Bible study that fits the group.

Fellowship. The early disciples were devoted to fellowship (Acts 2:42). Fellowship is the glue that holds the group together. It is a sense of belonging that produces a harmony due to a shared purpose. Fellowship is created as group members participate in life together. Fellowship is one of those things that a group knows when it is good and the group knows when it is bad.

The three churches surveyed validated the teaching that fellowship is created as group members experience life together. When asked, “How would ‘fellowship in the small group’ be characterized?” each church emphasized group members spending time together to build relationships. They were also asked, “How do members know ‘who’ to do life together with and how often should group members be together?”

LifePoint Church and FBC Jax promote multi-generational groups without any particular affinity. Mars Hill Church promotes a similar focus, but the church indicated

⁴³Keener, *Acts*, 1002.

their small groups tended to form around age groupings. How often small groups gather for each church is similar. All three churches have a year-round, pre-determined schedule of small group meetings. Mars Hill Church meets weekly and year-round. No other information was given. LifePoint Church has a year-round schedule that consists of three terms with a three to four week break between each term and most of December off. FBC Jax has a determined year-round schedule similar to LifePoint Church with three terms of nine to eleven weeks each, but with the summer months off.

These churches all promote a multi-generational approach to small group participation. Many groups contained young couples as well as older couples. However for Mars Hill Church groups would focus

Break bread together. The early disciples were devoted to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42b). “They broke bread in their homes and ate together” Acts 2:46a. To eat a meal together in a small group and to participate in the Lord’s Supper together are ways to participate in small group community. The breaking of bread can have a connection to fellowship. “Part of fellowship is sharing food together as those who had the means to share with others.”⁴⁴

There were a variety of meals practiced during this period in history. There were common meals and ceremonial meals. The common meal, as seems indicated here, related to a meal with a spiritual family similar to a meal with a biological family. During this time in history, Jews had adopted Hellenistic banquet customs. The ideal setting would be about three reclining couches for up to 12 people. Typically 10 to 15 people would gather in a home to share a meal. It would be culturally relevant for a small group of believers to gather to share a meal.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Keener, *Acts*, 1003.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 1004.

Breaking bread together for the churches researched would be to encourage the meal together, but all three also indicated it was up to each small group whether or not food was shared. LifePoint church was the most committed to sharing food as they ask their groups to share food that will fit on a small plate or on a napkin.

The other side of breaking bread is related to sharing the Lord's Supper in the small groups of the church. Biblical evidence seems to indicate that a small group could share the Lord's Supper together. All three churches surveyed indicated that their small groups could exercise the option to share the Lord's Supper in their small group, but very few share in this way. Generally, the practice of Lord's Supper in these churches would be observed in the large group worship time of the corporate church.

Prayer. The early disciples were devoted to prayer (Acts 2:42b). Prayer is a vehicle to communicate and commune with God. Prayer is an opportunity to seek the Lord and give freedom for God to intervene in our lives and the lives of others. Prayer was a common practice and practical teaching of the apostles and then later throughout biblical teaching. Clear examples of a directive to pray can be found in Romans 1:9-10, "constantly remember you in my prayers", Ephesians 6:18, "pray in the Spirit on all occasions", Colossians 4:2-4, "devote yourselves to prayer", 1 Thessalonians 3:10, "night and day we pray", 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "pray continually", 2 Thessalonians 3:1, "pray for us", and James 5:13, "Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray"

Early believers were given to reciting written prayers that they have had always prayed in the Temple, but were also now given new dimensions to praying to the God they were experiencing in a personal way. Prayer was a permanent part of the life of the believer.

All three of the churches surveyed indicated prayer is central to small group community life. Every small group, at every small group meeting is encouraged to spend

time in prayer. LifePoint Church takes prayer to another level as they teach their leaders to stop and pray every time a new need is discovered.

Mutual care. The early disciples sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need (Acts 2:45). Mutual care is a way for God's people to share the blessings God has given them to meet the needs of those in the small group, as well as those outside the group. The teaching on possessions in Acts 2 solidifies Gospel teaching on the subject. Luke 3:11, Luke 12:33, and Luke 14:33 are clear examples of biblical teaching on possessions. Luke 12:33 is a clear directive from Jesus to, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." There is a cost to following Jesus. In this case, the cost was to combine the wealth of the group to provide for those who could not provide for themselves. F. F. Bruce indicates that this model works great as long as everyone gets along. As disagreement enters the group, there will likely be disagreement over combining funds and who to help.⁴⁶

The model of mutual care in the small groups is transitional. Each of the surveyed churches are at a different stage of transition, but they all agree that mutual care in small groups is the best practice for the church of today. Mars Hill Church is on the first step and indicates that needs are met in the small groups as the small group is able. FBC Jax is working to transition from a pastoral base for caring for people to the small group process of meeting needs. LifePoint is firmly rooted in a practice of meeting all needs in the small group structure. Examples given include all baby showers, bridal showers, meals provided, etc. are all done as an act of mutual care in the small group. The church goes so far as to say that outside the context of the small group mutual care, there is no other option to meet needs.

⁴⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 74.

Praising God. With glad and sincere hearts the early disciples praised God. Worship can be described as a life devoted to and lived for God. The three churches surveyed indicated worship can mean anything from a music time in the small group to an application of sharing God's blessing with one another as they go through life together. In discussions with the small group leaders at Beaver Creek Baptist Church, the element of praising God is seen as the product of a church or small group living out the other basics of small group life outlined in Acts 2:42-47. If a group of believers are devoted to teaching, fellowship, prayer, breaking of bread, and mutual care, then those participants should develop a glad and sincere heart that praises God.

The continuation of "with glad and sincere hearts, praising God" would be, "enjoying the favor of all the people." When God's people are devoted to basics of biblical community in small groups and praising God in the process, others will notice and approve. The testimony of a faithful life devoted to Christ will attract others to the same Gospel message.

These seven small group practices should appear, in some way, in small group ministries. They will ultimately bring about a transformation of individuals to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Leadership

There is one area that has not been addressed yet – leadership. Jesus is the Son of God, Savior of the World. He didn't go through a process to qualify or serve an apprenticeship to become small group leader of the disciples. He was Jesus. But the rest of mankind does not have those credentials, and so there have to be qualifications in order to become a small group leader. A small group leader's job is to create an environment in which people can best see, respond, and engage in the work of the Holy

Spirit.⁴⁷ There are a number of personality types and temperaments that can be this kind of leader. A basic list of practical leader qualifications would include (1) confess Jesus Christ as Savior, (2) be an active member of the church, (3) believe the Bible is the God-spoken authoritative guide for humanity, (4) hold to the vision and core values of the church and (5) agree to the church leadership structure.⁴⁸

One of the primary qualities that Mars Hill Church looks for in a small group leader is character. Character that is equal to that of a deacon is necessary if pastoral care is part of ministry expectation.⁴⁹ Character should be a trait deemed admirable in all small group leaders. When evaluating a potential small group leader's character, what is seen is all that can be judged. Therefore, in the selection process, the small group ministry director should look for character that is evident in the potential small group leader's relationship with the Lord, in their personal life, and in their relationships with others.⁵⁰ Other practical, desirable skills include (1) ability to establish a group covenant, (2) ability to understand group dynamics, (3) ability to create a holistic meeting schedule, (4) ability to plan logistically, (5) ability to ask good questions, (6) ability to share group care, and (7) ability to prepare for future growth.⁵¹

To develop leaders, the church should have a coaching strategy and a leadership development pathway. A coaching strategy can be as simple as meeting with group leaders on a regular basis. A good coach is someone who can listen, ask good

⁴⁷Zempel, *Community is Messy*, 37.

⁴⁸Mosley, *Connecting in Communities*, 66.

⁴⁹House, *Community*, 184.

⁵⁰Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 47-50.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 52.

questions, and detect the fingerprints of God in another's life.⁵² Every leader needs a coach. The purpose of a coach is to give confidence to the small group leader by mentoring them through a personal relationship.

Leadership Development is also cultural, but the basics should involve an apprentice period, short and long training events,⁵³ and well-defined opportunities for growth and accountability.⁵⁴ Leadership Development seems to be the weakest part of many small group ministries. There is an expectation of excellence without the investment in necessary resources.⁵⁵

Functional Distinctives of Small Groups

When people consider participating in small groups they have many questions. Answers to some of these questions will be addressed in this section. These questions focus on the functional distinctives of small group ministry and include (1) Who can participate in small groups? (2) What will the group be studying? (3) When will small groups meet? (4) How long does the small group meet? and (5) What about the Lord's Supper?

Who can participate in small groups? As biblical community is developed in small groups, and group participants live out the basics of small group life, they will "enjoy the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:47). Favor comes as a result of a faithful life devoted to Christ, and will attract others to the same Gospel message. With the understanding that biblical community is found in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, there is an acknowledgement that people outside the covenant relationship are

⁵²Zempel, *Community is Messy*, 100.

⁵³Ibid., 101.

⁵⁴Mosley, *Connecting in Communities*, 119.

⁵⁵Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups*, 251.

going to want to know what it is all about. They will see the results, and be curious. So even though the majority of participants in small groups may already be believers, a portion of the groups' participants may be non-believers. Who can participate in a small group? Anyone who will come may participate in a small group, whether believer or non-believer, church member or non-church member.

LifePoint Church in Smyrna, Tennessee and Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky are just two examples of churches that practice an 'all come', community-based, small group ministry. Eddie Mosley is the Group Life Pastor at LifePoint Church where he leads their community-based strategy of small groups to spread the Gospel into local communities.⁵⁶ He acknowledges their small group ministry is geared towards discipleship of believers, but all people may come as a way to impact their neighborhood community for Christ.⁵⁷

Brad House is Executive Pastor of Ministries at Sojourn Community Church and was formerly on the staff at Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Part of the ministry of Sojourn Community Church is their community groups designed to reach neighborhoods.⁵⁸ Sojourn employs an 'all come' policy; anyone may attend their community groups. The goal is to have groups comprised of people who submit to and worship Jesus through prayer, devotion to Scripture, and praise.⁵⁹ The small groups are communities within themselves, but are contextualized in the neighborhoods where they reside. Groups can be designed to reach their neighbors and may look different from

⁵⁶Mosley, *Connecting in Community*, 15.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁸House, *Community*, 115.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 104.

neighborhood to neighborhood.⁶⁰

Who can participate in small groups? Anyone who may come may participate in small groups. biblical community is found in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, therefore believers are the ones who fully experience small group community. Non-believers may participate in small groups, but will not fully realize biblical community until they receive Jesus Christ and experience covenant community.

What will the group be studying? People want to know whether or not the material will be too deep for them to follow, or perhaps too shallow to provide benefits. Traditionally churches who utilize Sunday School classes use quarterly printed materials. As churches have moved to a more fluid small group model, other curriculum methods have been used.

For example, Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California was the pioneer in developing campaign material and master teacher curriculum. The campaign strategy for the church is to have the whole church focus for a period of time on one specific study. The study material is delivered during the preaching time, and then in a DVD teaching format used in all of the church's small groups.⁶¹ Steve Gladen, Pastor of Small Groups at Saddleback Community Church, leads the small groups to focus on individual, and group health by balancing fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism and worship.⁶² Group health is the goal and is developed through the small group ministry. The master teacher curriculum is a DVD teaching-based material. The small group host will play the video containing the teaching material and then facilitate

⁶⁰ House, *Community*, 109.

⁶¹ Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

group discussion.⁶³ Most small groups at Saddleback use campaign or master teacher material, but small groups can also choose material that does not have an accompanying DVD.⁶⁴

Another curriculum option is a sermon-based material plan. Lead Pastor Larry Osborne leads North Coast Church in Vista, California to follow a sermon-based curriculum for small group ministry.⁶⁵ Sermon-based small groups naturally close the back door of the church, and have closed it for decades for North Coast.⁶⁶ The secret for successful small groups is in the process, not in the specific format, procedures, or administrative structure. Anytime a group of friends commit to gather together to share their lives, pray, and discuss the biblical text, and life application of the previous weekend's sermon, good stuff happens.⁶⁷ In sermon-based small groups the sermons and the questions are important. They keep the church focused on God.⁶⁸

Ultimately small groups will be studying the Bible. The curriculum distinctive for small groups today consists of either sermon based material, DVD driven master teacher material or approved, printed small group material.

When will small groups meet? When small groups meet speaks to the day and time of small group meetings, and also to the timing of when an individual may join a small group. Groups set the day and time that best fits the needs of the participants.

⁶³Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose*, 34.

⁶⁴Ibid., 78.

⁶⁵“Growth Groups at North Coast Church,” accessed November 28, 2014, <http://mygrowthgroup.org>.

⁶⁶Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 75.

⁶⁷Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 76.

⁶⁸Ibid., 113.

Churches surveyed for this project gave no specific day or time for small groups and most of them indicated small groups met once a week. LifePoint Church asks groups to have at least 2 group meetings per month along with a small group party every month. The reasoning is centered on life issues. Life happens to everyone, and it becomes difficult to commit to an every-week meeting.⁶⁹

The broader distinctive deals with when an individual may join a small group. Are small groups open such that an individual can join at any point during the study, or are they closed, meaning an individual can only join at the beginning of the study? North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia is led by Andy Stanley. North Point practices a closed group model; once a community group gets started, no new people may be added unless the entire group agrees.⁷⁰ This is done purposefully to (1) keep disruptions down so the group can get more done, (2) provide a predictable environment where relationship can grow, (3) provide authentic community, and (4) provide an environment for spiritual growth.⁷¹

North Coast Church takes a similar approach, where groups are closed for the duration of the study term. However, for the first three weeks people can try-out a growth group to see if it fits them or not. If not, they may try another group. The trial period only lasts for the first three weeks of the term, after that growth groups are closed.⁷²

LifePoint Church has a modified version of open/closed in that they do not use the terms open or closed; they use the word, family. The belief is that each small group is like a family. There are times when the family needs to close the door, and deal with

⁶⁹Mosley, *Connecting in Community*, 50.

⁷⁰Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community: 5 Keys to Building a Small Group Culture* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 102.

⁷¹Ibid., 102-9.

⁷²Dave Enns, Telephone interview by author, December 1, 2014.

issues just with family members. Then there are times when the family is open for company, and others may join them. In this distinctive, the group decides when they are open and when they are closed. The key is to be sensitive to the family feel of the small group, and to not bring in new people without talking to the family first.⁷³

The distinctive of “When will small groups meet” is described as anytime that fits the group related to the day and time. Even though many churches still have an open policy of when to start in small groups, the trend is for groups to be closed during the study period to provide a predictable environment for community to develop.

How long does the small group meet? How long a small group meets is not about how long a meeting lasts, but rather how long a group stays intact. This specific distinctive is as different as each individual church’s vision for small groups. The traditional duration has been for groups to start and keep going without a predetermined end. LifePoint Church follows an ongoing duration for small groups.⁷⁴ Saddleback Church allows each small group to decide the duration of their own group.⁷⁵ Small groups at North Point Church have a predetermined duration ranging from 18 months to 2 years.⁷⁶ Finally, North Coast Church has developed a quarterly duration for small group ministry. The calendar year is divided into four quarters. From September through June, there are three quarters where groups meet, and the fourth quarter (summer) groups do not meet.⁷⁷

⁷³Mosley, *Connecting in Communities*, 90.

⁷⁴Ibid., 80.

⁷⁵Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose*, 109.

⁷⁶Stanley, *Creating Community*, 108.

⁷⁷Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 98.

What about the Lord's Supper? In chapter 3 under, "Seven Basics from Acts 2:42-47", the topic of breaking bread together had been covered. In summary, there is a clear understanding in Scripture that people can participate in sharing a meal together in small groups. This practice increases fellowship and aids in community building. An alternative interpretation of 'breaking bread together' has to do with sharing the Lord's Supper together. There is no biblical rule for when or where to share the Lord's Supper together. The purpose of the Lord's Supper, according to 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, is to remember the body and blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This certainly can be a community building activity for any believer, and is representative of the covenant relationship believers share. Based on the application of the Functional Distinctives just covered, whether or not the Lord's Supper will be shared in a small group should be up to the small group to decide. For example, small groups that are closed would be in a good position to have the Lord's Supper together, given the group members would all be known without risk of a first-time guest on the night of the Lord's Supper. However, none of the churches in this project limit small groups to believers only. That would mean that if the small group planned the Lord's Supper, the group would have to be sensitive to non-believers in the group. Churches from this project have indicated their small groups generally do not practice the Lord's Supper in small groups. The Lord's Supper is focused during the corporate worship experience, but has no biblical mandate forbidding it from small group gatherings.

In conclusion, God said, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NIV). The biblical account indicates the basics of small group life and practices have been around for centuries. How churches apply the basics of small group life may change, but what the church has learned from the Bible on the basics of small groups will not change, because the basics of Scripture are the same today as they were yesterday. The basics of biblical community in small groups can be found in Acts 2:42-47. Good foundations in

the early church are good foundations for the church today. While specific applications may change with time and culture, the foundational principles remain the same.

CHAPTER 4

THE SIXTEEN-WEEK PROJECT

In order to develop biblical community in small groups at Beaver Creek Baptist Church, a sixteen-week project was launched in June of 2014. At the time of the project, there had already been discussions about biblical community in small groups for nearly six years. The discussions centered on the purpose and function of small groups known as Sunday school classes. The project phases of information gathering and treatment were completed in September 2014 with a plan to implement best practices for developing biblical community in small groups through teaching about covenant relationship and the biblical aspects of small groups outlined in Acts 2:42-47.

Successful completion of this project was defined by five goals. These goals were (1) to gather data related to the current understanding of biblical community, (2) to lead members to a biblical understanding of community and encouraged them to participate, (3) to train small group leaders, (4) to implement changes to bring small groups in line with the biblical understanding of community, and (5) to gather data to determine if significant, statistical growth has occurred. The completion of the goals was accomplished through a pre-survey, preaching series, teaching of small group leaders, implementation of new directives, and a post-survey.

The first goal was to assess the current understanding of biblical community, the current practice of biblical community, and the current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups in Beaver Creek Baptist Church through an online pre-survey.¹

¹See appendix 1, “Developing Biblical Community Through Small Groups Assessment Tool.”

This survey took the form of 41 multiple choice questions utilizing the Likert scale. The t-Test for dependent samples was used to analyze the project data following the post-test.

The second goal was to provide a framework of biblical community that addressed a biblical understanding and practice of biblical community in small groups through a six-week preaching series.² The preaching series took place on Sunday mornings at Beavercreek Baptist Church, and the series was also available online.

The third goal was to equip small group leaders to lead their small groups to function in biblical community through a six-week training course.³ During the course of the preaching series and the implementation phase of best practices, small group leaders met with the project leader to develop these best practices derived from Acts 2:42-47 teachings.

The fourth goal was for equipped leaders to implement the needed changes in their small groups and bring them into line with the leaders' new understanding of biblical community.

The fifth goal was to assess the progress being made toward biblical community through an online post-survey.⁴ The second survey evaluated the progress individuals had made in their understanding and practice of biblical community and whether this understanding had any impact on participation in biblical community in small groups.

Goal 1: First Survey (Weeks 1 and 2)

A pre-survey was created to assess the current understanding of biblical community, the current practice of biblical community, and the current perceptions

²See appendix 5, "Biblical Community Through Small Groups" sermon series.

³The preaching series served as the training material for small group leaders.

⁴See appendix 1, "Developing Biblical Community Through Small Groups Assessment Tool."

towards biblical community in small groups in Beaver Creek Baptist Church.⁵ The survey had four main sections.

Biographical Section

The pre-survey began with an information section. The information section asked each participant to give their birth date in numeric form. This was used as the unique numerical identifier so surveys could be compared in a t-Test for dependent samples analysis. This section also asked participants if they were a church leader and if they would be willing to be interviewed as part of Goal 5. Also as a starting point, this section sought to learn whether or not each participant was already involved in a small group at Beaver Creek Baptist Church and if so, when did they become involved. These questions were necessary to give perspective to data that was collected during the pre- and post-survey.

Current understanding of biblical community in small groups. This section sought to learn what participants already understood about biblical community in small groups. This section was the hardest to create because the goal was to discover what people already understood regarding biblical community in small groups and not just what they thought they knew. Participants may have heard about “being set apart” related to question 8, but they may not have understood what it actually meant.

This section of the survey tried to discern what participants understood about (1) Covenant foundation and relationship, (2) Small group dynamics as patterned by Jesus and the church in Acts 2:42-47, (3) Small group leaders and (4) Small group basics: teaching, prayer, fellowship, breaking of bread, mutual care and worship. The responses to these questions served as the basis of understanding.

⁵See appendix 1, “Developing Biblical Community Through Small Groups Assessment Tool.”

Current practice of biblical community in small groups. The 12 questions in this section were designed to measure what participants were doing in the areas related to biblical community in small groups. The actions these questions were designed to measure were directly related to the questions in the previous section. Did what participants understand about biblical community in small groups affect their behavior to biblical community in small groups?

For example, during the previous sixteen weeks, were participants (1) Actively devoted to small groups practices, (2) Spending time in prayer for those in and out of their small group, (3) Actively working to meet the needs of those in their small group and those not in their small group, (4) Actively participating with small group members in their meetings and outside of meetings, (5) Implementing lessons learned in small groups to alter their lives, (6) Participating in corporate worship, and (7) Inviting others to their small group. The goal was to discern where they were right now, and then at the end of the project, survey them again to see if their participation in biblical community in small groups had changed.

Current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups. The final 5 questions were designed to gauge individual's perceptions towards biblical community in small groups. The areas measured were perceptions related to spirituality, participation, sharing, relevancy and outcome. This section is important because it may indicate the possibility for an individual to have a good understanding of biblical community in small groups, but not participate in small groups because of their perceptions on biblical community in small groups.

The method for survey collection was SurveyMonkey.com. Although hard-copies of the survey were made available, none were utilized. Upon creating the survey, a survey link was emailed to all adult participants of Beaver Creek Baptist Church. Not all survey respondents were members of the church. Regularly attending, non-member adults were also included in the survey.

The reason non-member, active participants were included is because Beaver Creek Baptist Church is located close to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and approximately 50 percent of the church is connected to the base. There are a number of military families who actively participate in the church, but who don't want to join the church for a number of reasons. These active participants attend worship and small groups; and because of their active participation, their input was important. All active adult participants of the church were notified by email and public announcements to participate in the project survey. Some non-member participants asked if they could formally participate and they were told, "Yes." So there is direct evidence that non-member, active adult participants did take the survey.

Every time the survey link was emailed there would be a surge of people completing the survey. For a two-week period of time the survey link was emailed a total of five times with a total response of 57 adults. The two-week survey process was completed and the goal was deemed successful.

Goal 2: Treatment: Preaching Series (Weeks 3-8)

There were two facets to the treatment for this project. Goal 3 dealt with the treatment related to small group leaders, but Goal 2 deals with the treatment as it related to the six-week preaching series. The goal of the preaching series was to provide a framework for biblical community in small groups. The series was titled "Biblical Community through Small Groups." The preaching series, delivered during the Sunday morning worship service, offered handouts for participants to follow the series. To

provide the opportunity for those who could not attend church on a given Sunday to participate, the messages were recorded and placed on the church website in an mp3 format. This format allowed the messages to be downloaded, and participants could listen to them when it was convenient for them.⁶

The heart of the message series was to walk through an understanding of the Old Testament covenants of Noah, Abraham and Moses, the New Testament covenant through Jesus Christ, and the application of the principles of Acts 2:42-47 as they apply to small groups for today. The preaching series titles were as follows:

1. "We Were Made for Covenant Community," June 22, 2014
2. "Jesus and Small Group Community," June 29, 2014
3. "The Church That Started it All," July 6, 2014
4. "Teaching and Fellowship," July 13, 2014
5. "Breaking Bread and Prayer," July 20, 2014
6. "The Community at Work," July 27, 2014

The preaching series was designed to biblically walk the church through the covenant journey to small group community. This journey was critical to the success of the project and to the church gaining a clear picture of how God led His people from the beginning of time, from covenant with God and His chosen leaders, to our relationship with God through the covenant with Jesus Christ. Once the church had a grasp of that concept, they progressed to understand how Jesus lived, as the head of our covenant relationship, and how his life example becomes an example of biblical community in small groups for us. The early church took the example of Jesus and modeled their lives after Him, and we can have confidence in those teachings to do the same. The desired outcome of the treatment was for participants to understand the covenant relationship through Jesus, and then be moved to follow the example of Jesus and the example of the church in Acts 2:42-47. Increased participation in biblical community through small

⁶See appendix 5, "Biblical Community through Small Groups" sermon series.

groups at Beavercreek Baptist Church is the aim.

The following is a summary of the progression of the preaching series.

Week 1: We Were Made for Covenant Community

Week 1 of the preaching series focused on how God set aside a chosen people to be in relationship with Him. The illustration to start was to consider M&M's. There are 28 different kinds of M&M's. Everyone has a favorite, and people generally choose their favorite to eat. God created mankind, but He chose some to be in a special relationship with Him. God took the initiative, created mankind, and placed them in the garden. Man sinned, was removed from the garden, and the relationship between God and His creation changed. Because of that sin and the sin that was to come, God decided to start over with mankind, and subsequently made a covenant with Noah.

The first time the word 'covenant' was used is related to Noah. In Genesis 6:1 – 9:17 the account of Noah and the reason for God's displeasure is revealed.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. ⁷ So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8)

God wiped-out mankind, protected Noah, his family, and the animals, and honored His word as part of the covenant. Noah was set aside in covenant relationship with God while the others were wiped out. However, soon after Noah came to be on dry ground again, they sinned.

As time progressed God made a covenant with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham promised that God would make Abraham into a great nation and that Abraham would be blessed (Gen 12:2-3). This covenant became God's way of creating a chosen people, a people who would live in covenant relationship with the Creator. The people would follow God's directives, and Abraham must walk rightly before the Lord.

The covenant with Moses elevated the Abrahamic Covenant. The whole covenant is spelled out in Exodus 20 through Leviticus 27:27. Exodus 19:4-6 is a summary of the covenant. This summary passage provided an opportunity for God to challenge the Israelites to enter into covenant with Him. Their agreement would constitute a commitment to show their loyalty, and gratitude by their obedience to the law.

God is creator, but His intention is to create for Himself a particular people. The covenant represents the separation of His chosen people from the general world population, the beginning of the outworking of his intention to bring close to Himself a people that will join Him for all eternity as adopted members of his family, and then show the truth of God to the world.

The covenant with Noah saved Noah and his family and in effect, saved all generations to be in community with God. The covenant with Abraham set aside a specific group of people to be in community with Him. That covenant community was taken even further in covenant community with God through the Mosaic Covenant. These progressive covenants served to guide God's people (Israel) in covenant community with God. There is however, a new covenant that will be the final covenant, through Jesus Christ.

Israel had agreed and come under covenant relationship with God. Israel sinned and suffered great national punishment for their sin. The prophet Jeremiah preaches that the day will come when Yahweh would bring them back together, destroy their oppressors, and bring them under a new covenant that would not be written on stone, but on their hearts. The new covenant was found in Jesus Christ. This part of the message focused on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, Matthew 26, and Luke 22. The key was an understanding of the body and blood of Jesus as the sacrifice that sealed the covenant.

Time was also spent in Hebrews 8-10, with a lengthy explanation of the foundation of the new covenant and the life change that comes from participating in the new covenant.

The main point of Week 1 was for participants to understand the covenant journey through the Old Testament and the foundation laid for the covenant we experience today through Jesus Christ.

Week 2: Jesus and Small Group Community

The second message began with the teaching of Jesus regarding the Lord's Supper. Jesus taught about the significance of His life and death, combined with the observance of the Passover Celebration, and then initiated a new teaching that the church today calls, Communion or Lord's Supper.

This message examined the life of Christ as He lived and interacted with an outer circle of people. The outer circle was defined as those who had repented, committed to follow Jesus, but had not left their normal lives to follow Him wherever He went. This circle constituted a large number of people. Jesus also interacted with an inner circle. The inner circle consisted of those men Jesus chose to follow Him. With the inner circle Jesus lived, taught, and met the needs of those in the inner circle. Jesus, and the inner circle, also met the needs of those outside the inner circle.

From the understanding of Jesus living in community in a large group and in a small group, the application was made that believers are to experience life together in the large group (community worship), and experience life together in the small group, however those small groups are defined. The key was a rhythm between large group and small group. Both are needed, and to be healthy the church cannot ignore either one.

Week 3: The Church that Started it All

Week 3 focused on Acts 2:42-47 as the foundational passage for small group

life for the church in Acts and for the church today. The focus was more on what the small group was about rather than how the specific functions were performed. Several examples were cited of churches who had taken Acts 2:42-47, and created a foundation for small groups. These churches were examples of how the same basics were applied in different ways, but still be in keeping with biblical implications.

From Acts 2, there are seven characteristics of biblical small groups. They are devotion, teaching, fellowship, breaking bread together, prayer, mutual care, and praising God. These characteristics, in a broader sense, represent the whole of community life and in the small group context are applied culturally and in relation to the purpose of the small group. The remainder of the Week 3 preaching time was dedicated to exploring what it meant to be devoted. The conclusion was that without devotion, individuals would not fully participate in biblical community in small groups. There was no way to be devoted by accident. The believer must make a choice to be devoted.

Week 4: Teaching and Fellowship

The remaining six topics were handled over a three-week period of time to give ample treatment of each topic. Regarding teaching, an agreement was made that the church and small groups are to be committed to the Bible, rather than to books about the Bible. Books about the Bible may be beneficial, but the foundation must be the Bible itself. Part of this message looked at the validity of the Bible. Second Timothy 3:10-17 was addressed as a passage that gives dimension to biblical teaching and application. General perceptions on the Bible were also explored from research provided by Lifeway and The Barna Group. Theories of Inspiration were also addressed. Those theories were Intuition Theory, Illumination Theory, Dynamic Theory, Dictation Theory, and Verbal Plenary Theory. In addition, issues of doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction were addressed.

Fellowship is a sense of belonging that produces a harmony due to a shared

purpose. Potential levels of fellowship were addressed. Those levels were choosing to belong, learning to share, doing my part, and loving believers as family.

Week 5: Breaking Bread and Prayer

Breaking bread can be related to eating a meal together and sharing in the Lord's Supper together. Given that the Lord's Supper was given during a meal, it could be that the two go together much more than we practice today.

How Jesus prayed for His disciples became the focus of prayer. How did Jesus pray for those within His inner circle? John 17:13-24 teaches that Jesus prayed that the Father would give them protection, unity, joy, purity, and a mission. Jesus prayed at His own baptism, he went to lonely places and prayed, He spent the night praying, prayed with the disciples near Him, and He taught His disciples to pray. All of these are lessons that prayer is important and should be practiced in the large group and the small group.

Week 6: The Community at Work

This message was difficult to share given the events of the two weeks prior to delivery. Just prior to preaching this message several tragedies occurred within the church body. An 18 year-old in the church died of a drug overdose in the basement of his home about 10 days prior to this message. Five days prior to this message, that same young man was buried, and after arriving home from the burial, it was learned that his older brother's best man from his wedding had driven to a local park and killed himself. Those events occurred on a Thursday. Then on Friday, an elderly man from the church was buried too.

The focus of this message was that as the community of the church is doing the elements of small group outlined in Acts 2:42-47, people notice, and the church enjoys the favor of those around.

The family whose son died had just moved. They had been in their new home

for only a week, and still had a rental house to clean to get back their security deposit. The church decided this was the perfect opportunity for the church to respond. A call was given to the church as a whole, and 24 people came to clean the rental house. Within three hours the house was cleaned and ready for inspection to get the security deposit returned. A neighbor was watching what was happening at the house. He came over and brought his lawn mower to help mow the lawn. Afterwards we talked, and he said, “I’m impressed. I’m impressed that the church would come out in such numbers and do this. Nice job.”

The other element for this week’s message was worship. Worship is our response to God’s love, and it is expressing my affection to God. Worship can take many forms and may contain many styles, but the focus of worship is on God.

Goal 3: Equip Small Group Leaders (Weeks 3-8)

The third goal was to equip small group leaders to lead their small groups to function in biblical community. This goal was met by utilizing the six-week message series and the effectiveness of this training was measured by an online survey⁷ of the leaders related to what they should know and understand about biblical community in small groups from the training material.⁸

There were six topics for agreement:

1. Covenant Community
2. Jesus and small group community
3. The church in Acts 2:42-47 and devotion
4. Small Group basics: Teaching, Fellowship, Breaking Bread, Prayer, Mutual Care
5. The outcome of the basics lived-out
6. Best practices to implement.

⁷See appendix 2, “Online Survey for Small Groups Leaders.”

⁸The sermon series content from Goal 2 served as the training material for small group leaders. Small group leaders met with the pastor to consider the week’s teaching and then worked together to apply that week’s teaching to their small group. No formal document was created.

At the end of the project, all four small group leaders participated in an online survey.⁹ Goal 3 was deemed successful when the small group leaders scored above 90 percent on the online survey indicating an agreement to the training offered, and to the basics of biblical community in small groups. The collective score of all the small group leaders was 98 percent, therefore Goal 3 was successful. From Week 1 to implementation of best practices, there were three stages.

Stage 1: Training and Document Creation

Stage 1 was the process of training and discussion to produce the document *Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry*.¹⁰ This document came from the discussions related to biblical community in small groups as derived from the preaching series. Of the seven small group characteristics outlined in Acts 2:42-47 (devotion, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, mutual care and worship), the group suggested a framework to better understand these characteristics. Devotion was established as the qualifier of what was to follow in the Acts 2:42-47 passage. Without devotion individuals will not be involved in the other elements. As participants are devoted to the small group basics, the result would be praising God, and finding favor of the people. That left Bible study, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer and mutual care as the core of biblical community in small groups.

Stage 2: Evaluation in Small Groups

Stage 2 to gaining and implementing best practices in small groups was to take the document, *Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry*, review it with the

⁹See appendix 2, “Online Survey for Small Group Leaders”.

¹⁰See appendix 4, “Beavercreek Baptist Church Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry.”

adult small group members, and have the groups evaluate themselves in light of what the document proposed. The responses to the document were mixed. Here is a general summary of each of the small group's response after evaluating their small group based on the document.

Group 1: We are a small church so why do we need to be involved in a small group?

Group 2: Group agreement on characteristics. This group graded themselves with letter grades of B+, B+, C, A, B.

Group 3: Agreed they were doing well on all.¹¹

Group 4: General agreement with the basics of the document. Why are we changing things just to be changing things?

This stage gave the small group leaders and the pastor some direction as to what each small group did well and what each small group lacked.

Stage 3: Best Practices Establishment

The next discussion took into consideration everything that had taken place to develop at least one best practice for each of the five basics of small group (teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, and mutual care). While developing best practices for each, a decision was made that fellowship and breaking of bread often go together. Therefore, fellowship and breaking bread were combined into one small group basic, and one best practice was created. There was agreement that there would be additions to best practices as the small group ministry grows.

For the basic of teaching, groups would choose biblically based, quarterly material chosen to meet the needs of the group. This material would be denominational material or other small group material that is biblically based. The best practice here is that the Bible is the basis of study and other related items are extra. The material will be chosen to meet the needs of each group.

¹¹Group 3 indicated they were doing well based on the evaluation. This group was a new small group and was started with this model in mind.

The best practice for fellowship and breaking of bread was for each small group to plan one annual meal together and also plan quarterly times for the group to get together on a casual basis outside of small group meetings. This will allow fellowship to prosper and groups to break bread together.

There are two best practices for prayer that have been established. The first is the basic prayer request and prayer time at every small group meeting. This will allow small group members to hear and share concerns, and to actively pray for each other. The other best practice that has been established is a prayer bucket. Group members would write their prayer concern on a card, all cards would be placed in the bucket, and as the bucket comes around the room each group member would take a card and pray for that person and the need for the next week.

Finally, in the basic of mutual care the decision was made to establish a partnership ministry with small group leaders and deacons. Families in each of the four adult small groups were assigned a deacon. The deacon will work with the small group leader to facilitate care of the members. The aim will be to lead the small group to meet the needs of their own members facilitated by the small group leader and a deacon. The ultimate goal would be to have a deacon in every small group. As of this project date two of the four small groups have deacons as active participants. Through the deacon selection and assignment process, each small group will have a deacon as an active participant.

Goal 4: Best Practices Implementation (Weeks 9-14)

Goal 3 established best practices to be implemented in all of the adult small groups. Successful completion of Goal 4 will be determined when all of the best practices are implemented. Again, the best practices established were (1) Teaching – Bible based quarterly material, (2) Fellowship/Breaking of Bread – Annual event and quarterly events, (3) Prayer – Prayer request time and prayer buckets, and (4) Mutual Care – Small

group and deacon partnership. All of these best practices have been implemented. Each adult class has chosen material that is biblically based and on a quarterly rotation schedule. Three of the adult small groups have chosen Lifeway material. Two classes have chosen the LifeMatters series and another has chosen the MasterWork material. The fourth adult small group has chosen a book study that is quarterly based.

Small groups have set-up a calendar of events for fellowship and breaking of bread. Each group will host a holiday event and then plan a quarterly time together. These dates will be scheduled into 2015.

The prayer practices have been implemented. Two of the adult small groups are utilizing the practice of prayer requests and group prayer. Many people in those groups record these prayers in a form of a prayer sheet for themselves. The other two adult small groups are utilizing the practice of the prayer bucket. Small group participants have indicated they enjoy this method for prayer, and they have also indicated they have been choosing prayer requests of people for whom they never thought to pray before.

The best practice for mutual care to meet the needs of group members through a partnership with the small group leaders and the deacons has been established. The deacons met with the pastor and assigned church families to deacons primarily based on the small group divisions. Deacons will work with the small group leaders to lead the small group members to meet each other's needs.

Goal 5: Second Survey (Weeks 15 and 16)

The fifth goal was to assess the progress being made toward biblical community. A second survey was needed to assess the current understanding, practice and perception of small group ministry in the church. The second survey was exactly the same as the first survey. An email was sent out to the entire church and asked all members to participate in the survey. Some of the church participants, at the time of the second survey, were new to the church and were not at the church to take the first survey.

For the purpose of this project their information could not be used, but the information from their survey was still useful to gain insight into new participant's views on community in small groups. For church participants who took both surveys, their survey results were the basis for this project. Successful completion of this part of Goal 5 was to have 80 percent of the original respondents take the second survey. Those numbers were achieved and the goal was met. Specific details for goal success will be offered in Chapter 5.

The data from the first survey was downloaded from SurveyMonkey.com to an Excel spreadsheet. All of the survey questions needed the data responses converted from a letter to a numerical value. This conversion was necessary for the statistical analysis of the project.

Once the second survey was completed and the data download, the conversion process took place again. Two columns were created with the corresponding data. Each person who took the survey used their date of birth as their unique identifier. After the second survey was completed, each respondent's pre- and post- results were compared. This process took time to locate both data samples for each person and place them in two corresponding columns. To analyze the two data samples, the Data Analysis function in Excel was used, specifically the option t-Test: paired two sample for means. The mean difference was set to '0', with Alpha at .05. This analysis will be reviewed in Chapter 5.

The final stage of the assessment was to interview 10 percent of the respondents. That would be a minimum of 6 people. For this project, 10 respondents were interviewed, 5 were leaders in the church, and 5 were not leaders in the church. The goal was to learn why people answered the survey the way they did. Individuals indicated in Section 1 of the survey, whether they were willing to be interviewed. If they agreed, the participant gave contact information for follow-up. The survey showed that every church leader was already involved in a small group before the project started. Church leaders

indicated that they felt to be a leader in the church, there has to be a commitment to the basic characteristics of small group life. Those who were not church leaders did not show as strong a devotion to small group life. Of those who indicated they were not a church leader, and were not involved in a small group, were all over the age of 62. Their feelings were that the church as a whole is the church, and a small group should not be given more attention than the church as a whole.

There were those who indicated growth in their understanding of biblical community in small groups. Their responses indicated a new perspective where they didn't realize before how important it is to be involved in biblical community in small groups. This area will be evaluated in detail in Chapter 5, but one marker of growth was in participation in small groups. Some adults become involved in a small group as a result of the project and indicated so in their interview. This facet will be reviewed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

God has a plan for His people. From the beginning of time that plan was to live in relationship with the Creator. Because of sin, the plan changed. God still desires that relationship, but man has his mind set on others things. A covenant relationship is not just an Old Testament practice. Covenant relationship is the heart of the believer's relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ.

The journey of exploring a biblical understanding of covenant was enlightening. From the interviews it was learned that there were some that no matter how it was put and no matter how it was said, it is a Sunday school class not small a group. Change takes time, but for many at Beavercreek Baptist Church, change has begun. The process for the project was relatively short related to the amount of time it takes to change opinions of some of those in church. This process will continue.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to guide members of Beaver Creek Baptist Church, to function in biblical community through small groups. This chapter serves to evaluate whether the project was successful in increasing the church's understanding of small groups, increasing the participation in small groups, and changing their perceptions of small groups. This evaluation contained seven sections. Section 1 will evaluate the project's purpose by asking, "Did this project guide members to function in biblical community through small groups?" Section 2 is an evaluation of the project's goals. Does a statistical analysis reveal that the goals of the project were met? Section 3 and Section 4 will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the project. Section 5 will offer suggested modifications to the project. Section 6 will examine theological reflections and Section 7 will cover personal reflections.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project, to guide members of Beaver Creek Baptist Church to function in biblical community through small groups, was met as of the completion of the project. The results of the survey also indicated that the project was successful, $t_{(49)} = 4.493$, $p < .00000429$.¹ In addition to the statistical growth indicated, four major components contributed to the fulfillment of the project's purpose (1) prayer, (2)

¹See appendix 6, table A4.

participation of the church, (3) participation of the small group leaders, and (4) the preaching series.

The first component that contributed to the fulfillment of the project's purpose was prayer. Throughout the project church leaders and some church members were continually in prayer for the church and the process of developing biblical community in small groups. Discussions regarding how to care for the needs of church members; the role of deacons, the role of the pastor, and church stability had taken place for many years. Beaver Creek Baptist Church had experienced a number of difficulties in meeting the needs of its members as well as determining who was responsible for meeting those needs. As a result of those dilemmas, church leaders, and church members began to pray that God would reveal how the church should function in biblical community in small groups as a way to meet the need. Prayer was the driving force used to seek God's direction. Prayer was also offered for peace among the members given that a discussion about small groups in the past had caused some level of uneasiness.

The second component that contributed to the fulfillment of the project's purpose was the participation of adult church participants. There were two major issues that could have prevented this project from going forward. This project began in the summer of 2014. In 2013 Beaver Creek Baptist Church had participated in the Transformational Church survey and subsequent evaluation of the church ministries. Because of this, it was possible the church would not want to participate in this project due to a perception that the church had just completed a similar project.

The second major issue was a church split six months before this project began. The split divided the community, complete with hurt feelings, innuendo and unanswered questions. Due to conflict surrounding a staff member resignation, a number of families left the church. As a result there were fewer people to draw from to take the two surveys related to this project. Even with these two major issues in the minds of the

church, adults participated in this project. The survey was directed to adults only, but because of the preaching series and the public discussions that ensued, the whole church became involved.

The third component that contributed to the fulfillment of the project's purpose was the participation of the small group leaders. These four men were dedicated through this process as evidenced by their faithful leading of their small groups, and talking to their small group participants about what it means to function in biblical community. In a meeting with the small group leaders the document, *Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry* was created.²

The fourth component that contributed to the fulfillment of the project's purpose was the series of messages preached titled "Biblical Community through Small Groups." The intent of the series was to follow a path of covenants from Noah, Abraham, and Moses to Jesus Christ. As adult participants learned the meaning of covenant, understood the connection between a covenant relationship, and the created purpose of God's people living in community, then the church would know how to function in biblical community in small groups. This message series was the catalyst for the entire project.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The data and other detailed information provided in this section will offer substantial evidence that the goals of the project were satisfied. Five goals were used to determine the effectiveness of the project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of biblical community, the current practice of biblical community, and the current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups in Beaver Creek Baptist Church through an online pre-survey. The goal would have been deemed successful at the

²See appendix 4, "Dynamic Characteristics for Small group Ministry."

completion of the pre-survey. One key to the success of the survey was to recruit a minimum of 80 percent of the active adult participants. Eighty percent of the active adults at Beavercreek Baptist Church were 54 adults. A total of 57 adults participated in the first survey.

The data was reviewed in four parts to determine overall success. The first part of the survey, “Current Understanding of Biblical Community in Small Groups” showed significant statistical changes, $t_{(49)}=3.482$, $p < .001$ (see table A1). The aim of this section was to learn what participants already understood about biblical community in small groups. Analysis showed that the increase in understanding was a result of the treatment and not by chance. The second part, “Current Practice of Biblical Community in Small Groups” showed significant statistical changes, $t_{(49)} = 2.461$, $p < .017$. (see table A2). Growth was seen in the participation of biblical community in small groups as more participants became involved in small groups and as current attendees became more involved in the basics of small group life. The third part, “Current Perceptions towards Biblical Community in Small Groups” also showed significant statistical changes, $t_{(49)} = 2.613$, $p < .011$ (see table A3). This section measured individual’s perceptions of the validity of small groups. By the end of the project, the data showed an increase in individual’s perceptions of the importance of biblical community in small groups. Finally, combining all three parts of the survey, the data indicates significant statistical changes, $t_{(49)} = 4.493$, $p < .00000429$ (see table A4). Goal 1 was deemed a success given that data showed significant statistical changes through the pre- and post- surveys.

The second goal was to provide a framework of biblical community that addressed an understanding and practice of biblical community in small groups. The process to meet the goal was accomplished through a 6-week sermon series. The sermon series started on June 6, 2014, and concluded on July 27, 2014. The sermon series helped participants gain a clear understanding of biblical community and how that understanding

would then be practiced in small groups. There were two stated outcomes that dictated success for this goal.

The first outcome had two parts; an increase in understanding and an increase in practice by those gaining the framework information. As stated in Goal 1, the data shows that the project as a whole, and all three parts of the survey individually demonstrated significant statistical growth. In the area of understanding the survey had 17 questions. The top two questions in this section that indicated the greatest growth were Question 22, “Praying in front of others in a small group is a sign of trust in your fellow group members” +9.33 percent, and Question 17, “Small group principles can be applied culturally therefore they may not look the same every time” +8.02 percent. These showed a clear increase in understanding given that in the past it was very difficult to get people to pray in front of others and groups wanted to do the same things without consideration of group dynamics.

As stated in Goal 1, the data showed that there was significant statistical growth in the practice of biblical community in small groups that could not be explained by random chance. The top two areas in this section that showed significant growth were Question 28, “In the past 16 weeks, my small group and I have worked to meet the needs of those in the group” +13.58 percent, and Question 34, “In the past 16 weeks, I have invited someone new to attend my small group” +7.25 percent. These two questions indicated that participants took their new understanding of biblical community and put them into practice.

The second outcome was to realize a 10 percent increase in community participation through small group involvement. This part of the success indicator has to do with an increase in adult attendance in small groups. Participation in small groups takes many forms, attendance in a small group is only one such form. At the beginning of the project adult participation in small groups from February – May, 2014 averaged 48.

During the project and just after the completion of the project from July – October, 2014, adult participation in small groups totaled 54. The growth was 10 percent.

The third goal was to equip small group leaders to lead their small groups to function in biblical community through a 6-week training course. The effectiveness of this training was measured by an online survey of the small group leaders to measure their understanding of biblical community in small groups from the training model. This goal was deemed successful by completing the training and when adult small group leaders scored a minimum of 90 percent on their online survey.

Small group leaders met with the project director and based on the Acts 2:42-47 passage constructed a working document to evaluate all small groups.³ The goal was to take the material as presented in the sermon series, and create a working document that outlines the basics of small groups. Once the basics were agreed upon, a sample list of best practices were outlined for small groups to implement. This goal was deemed successful when the small group leaders scored a minimum of 90 percent on an online survey showing agreement with the document and thereby agreeing to the basic characteristics of small group life. The total group score was 94 percent. This goal was deemed successful as a result of this survey.

The fourth goal called for an implementation of best practices in small group life. These best practices were created from the small group characteristics outlined by the small group leaders. Group leaders took the Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry, and talked to their group about the content and application of the characteristics. One group even rated themselves via A, B, C, rating. From these basic characteristics a list of best practices were created:

1. Teaching – Bible based quarterly material.
2. Fellowship/Breaking of Bread – Annual event and quarterly events.

³See appendix 4, “Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry.”

3. Prayer – Prayer request time and prayer buckets.
4. Mutual Care – Small group and deacon partnership.

Of the best practices, at least one best practice was implemented from each division in each small group. These best practices are a beginning to functioning in small group life. As participants and small groups grow other best practices will be developed to meet the needs of people.

The fifth goal had two benchmarks for success. The first benchmark was to survey 80 percent of the original participants again to determine whether or not the proposed treatment created significant statistical growth in biblical community in small groups. The overall data from the two surveys showed significant statistical growth in the project, $t_{(49)} = 4.493$, $p < .00000429$. Survey 1 had 57 participants take the survey. Eighty percent of those participants would require 46 participants to take the second survey for the goal to be successful. The second survey had 49 participants. The first benchmark of success for Goal 5 was achieved.

The second benchmark of success for Goal 5 included a survey of 10 percent of the survey participants to determine their motivation for answering the survey the way they did. Church leaders and non-leaders were interviewed. This benchmark was deemed a success given that 10 percent of the respondents were interviewed, and the insights gained from those interviews are included below.

After leader identification there were four interview questions.

Question 1 asked participants to characterize the survey. A number of leaders and non-leaders found it difficult to know how to answer the question. They struggled to interpret the difference between agreeing with something and strongly agreeing with something. This caused them to answer one way the first time and another way the second time when they wanted to indicate the same level of response both times. Since the first survey had been four months earlier, there was difficulty remembering how the person answered the first time.

Question 2 asked participants if they were currently involved in a small group. All of those who indicated they were a church leader indicated they were already involved in a small group. They felt it was a necessary part of their role as a church leader to be connected to others in the church in a small group and for their spiritual growth. For those who were not church leaders, the two most common responses were fellowship and mutual care. Those few interviewed had begun to experience relationships in a new way and from those relationships they felt more compelled to work to meet each other's needs. This was evidenced in the survey through Question 28 which saw an increase of 13.58 percent of those who actively worked to meet the needs of others in their small group.

Question 3 asked participants about what they may have learned through the sermon series. The most prominent answer given by leaders and non-leaders was a new understanding of covenant. Until that sermon series the understanding of covenant was incomplete. Respondents commented that since the series they have noticed in their Bible reading how often they read about covenant. One respondent indicated that the sermon series clarified for her the importance of small groups. This particular respondent had commented before how she did not think there was any need to be involved in a small group. She had not formally participated in a small group, but came to realize she treated those who sit around her every Sunday as a small group. The treatment of those around her in the worship service was a shadow of true covenant community, but it has become a start pointing to her moving towards community in small groups.

The final question asked participants if there were any issues of disagreement with the material. Leaders did not indicate any issues of disagreement, but there were a couple points of disagreement from non-leaders. The points of disagreement centered on the Lord's Supper and who should be responsible to meet people's needs. Regarding the Lord's Supper one individual did not feel it would be appropriate to have the Lord's

Supper in the small group. She felt like this observance should only be done with the church as a whole. Regarding who is responsible for meeting people's needs, this person felt like it was the pastor's role to meet her needs. She indicated she was raised that way.

When the raw data from the survey was examined closer it was discovered that 67 percent of those who showed no significant statistical change in the understanding of small group life or participation in small group life were over 61 years old. This does not degrade those over the age of 61 it merely indicates a slower transitional process for those in this age group and possibly no change at all.

Strengths of the Project

There were five primary strengths of this project. The first strength was that the project was biblically based. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." Therefore, the Bible is the perfect foundation to measure ourselves, and our church. This project started in Genesis with an understanding of covenant and went through the Bible to Hebrews. The central passage regarding biblical community in small groups was Acts 2:42-47. Having the Bible as the basis of what the church does takes the discussion out of the realm of opinion, and takes it into the realm of God's word. There may still be some disagreement as to what a specific passage may indicate, but for this project an overall understanding of biblical truth became relevant.

The second strength of this project was that the sermon series involved the entire church. When the church has Sunday night or Wednesday night services, only a small part of the church participates. At Beaver Creek Baptist there may be 120 people on a Sunday morning, but only 15 people come to review an overhaul of the church Constitution and Bylaws on a Wednesday evening. If biblical community in small groups is that important, then the teaching on biblical community in small groups should be front and center in the church. Sunday morning was that time when the pastor had the attention

of the church as a whole. By delivering the sermon series on Sunday morning, the whole church became involved. This strategy also impacted youth in the church. Teenagers were not part of the research for this project, but the teens of the church participated in the sermon series which means they should have heard the basics of small group life as well.

For those who could not attend the sermon series on a Sunday morning the church recorded the messages, and placed them on the church website in an mp3 format. Website statistics indicate that since the start of the preaching series on June 22, 2014 through October 1, 2014, some part of the 6-part series had been downloaded over 200 times. The whole church was involved for the greatest impact.

The third strength was the diverse make-up of adult participants. The unique numerical identifier for each participant was their birth date in numerical form. Calculating ages from that identifier reveals that the youngest person who took the survey was 19 and the oldest person who took the survey was 74. Averaging all participants who took both surveys, the average age was 53. This multi-generational response provided church members of all ages the opportunity to be heard. The next question in the survey asked participants how long they had attended Beaver Creek Baptist Church. Based on the responses, the shortest tenure was 3 months and the longest tenure was 32 years. Averaging all responses gives an average length of participation of 8.25 years. The broad range of responses provided information from individuals who have different tenures at the church. As of September 2014, the youngest adult church participant was 18 and the oldest was 84 and the average age of all adult participants was 51. The survey was not monopolized by any one age group or any one group who may have come to the church at the same time.

A fourth strength of this project was that it was a research project, and not a committee project. Committees have served a great purpose in the church, but sometimes

a committee does not represent the church as a whole and their report can be more about what the committee thinks rather than what research shows. The entire adult body of the church had an opportunity to participate in the project. Once both surveys were completed the data was interpreted through a mathematical process.

The final strength of this project was that it gave the church a place to begin to move forward. Many church projects are seen as stand-alone projects. The data is collected and discussed, but church continues as usual. That will not be the case with this project. The Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry document is now the foundational document for Beaver Creek Baptist Church. The small group leaders of the church will meet again, and hone the document, and bring it to the church for adoption. Once adopted, a framework will be created to implement the best practices of small groups to guide the church forward to function in biblical community.

Weaknesses of the Project

This project had four main weaknesses. The first weakness was related to timing. Beaver Creek Baptist Church is a transient church; many church members are not originally from the area. Because of this, many people take the summer to go visit family. This project started in June and concluded in September, but even if the project were moved to another time, there would be cause for people to be out of town for some reason.

Timing also has to do with the length of the project. A 16-week project is a long time to dedicate to one specific project. There were ministry issues that arose that caused the process to change. In one week there were three burials, including the burial of an 18-year-old church member. The project was able to achieve success in all five goals, but some of the timing issues were different than had been anticipated.

The second weakness of this project, and seemingly the main weakness, was that the project tried to accomplish too much in a short period of time. Big change in the

church can be met with resistance, but sometimes even talking about change will be met with resistance. Lasting change has proven to be very difficult to facilitate in this church. Instead of trying to change every aspect of small group life it may have been better to tackle a couple at a time. The project is officially over, but the work has just begun.

The third weakness of the project was a lack of tracking regarding whether or not the 49 participants who took both surveys and on whom the results are based, heard all 6 sermons about biblical community in small groups. The data shows that the project as a whole saw significant statistical growth, and the growth was not a result of random chance. There would be greater confidence in the results if it could be determined that the 49 adult participants did in fact hear all the sermons.

The fourth weakness was the online survey of the small group leaders⁴ to determine if they had learned and agreed with the small group characteristics outlined in the study.⁵ Due to time constraints the survey created was far too simple and the questions were leading. The results from this survey would carry greater weight and reveal much more had the survey been given more consideration.

Suggested Project Modifications

This was the first time I have done this type of project. Knowing what I know now, I would do many things differently. Related to the goals, some of the goals tried to accomplish too much, and some of them had multiple parts, but only one part was the qualifier for successful completion of the goal. This becomes a continuation of the argument that too much was attempted in this one project.

⁴See appendix 2, "Online survey for Small Group Leaders."

⁵See appendix 5, "Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry."

For example, in Goal 2 success of the goal was again contingent on statistical growth through the process of increasing knowledge of biblical community in small groups. The intent of the goal was to offer a treatment, the preaching series. The goal should have been successful based on completing the preaching series given the parameters set. The statistical growth should be in goal five.

In Goal 3 meeting every week with small group leaders proved to be too difficult. It is not that the facilitator or the small group leaders were not committed to the process, but the small group leaders are all volunteers with jobs and responsibilities outside of the church, and finding weekly meeting times all can support was difficult. The goal should have indicated some measure of meeting, but probably not every week. For example, during one week of the project the church had an 18-year-old die of a drug overdose, a friend of that family shoot himself, and the father of a church member died. These events made it impossible to meet every week.

Trying to do too much during this project seems to be the theme of what needs to change. For Goal 4 to be successful all best practices learned must be implemented in some fashion for the goal to be successful. Knowing what I know now, this goal should indicate implementing one major best practice at a time with an interval of integration before trying to implement another best practice. The process to accomplish this part of the goal has proven to be quite a task. The second part of Goal 5 also included an interview of 10 percent of the respondents to gather information regarding their perceptions, and why they answered the survey the way they did.

To summarize, the biggest change would be to narrow the scope of the project. During one of the seminars on campus I do remember someone asking if I was trying to do too much in one project. I said, “No” and was confident it would be alright in the end. There is still much that has been learned, but future projects need to have a narrower focus.

Theological Reflections

There are many theological implications of this project. Three have been chosen to be address related to this project (1) salvation through covenant, (2) the body of Christ, and (3) servanthood. A journey through the covenants of God with Noah, Abraham, and Moses revealed that through those covenants God set-aside a people unto Himself. Their salvation rested on faith in God and faithful living by following the Word of God.⁶ With the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of the previous covenants have reached their fulfillment, so that the salvation realities that Jesus achieved and applied to his people were not exactly the same as under the old covenant.⁷ In Him, all of the previous covenants have now come to their conclusion. In His life and work on the cross, our Lord achieved our eternal redemption, secured a new covenant promise, provided the gift of the Spirit, and gave birth to a new community – a people in faith union with Him. This is the means of salvation through the new covenant. Baptism became the sign of the new covenant relationship, and was reserved for only those who have entered into these salvation realities by the sovereign work of God’s grace.⁸

As the prior covenants were sealed by the blood of a sacrifice, so too was the new covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus Christ. The new covenant is the covenant sealed with Jesus’ blood, which puts an end to all other sacrifices.⁹ Paul reminds the early believers of this when he says in 1 Corinthians 11:25, “In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”” The writer of Hebrews also emphasizes this point in

⁶Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press) 1994, 117-18.

⁷Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 684.

⁸Ibid., 685.

⁹John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing) 2002, 326.

Hebrews 9:15, “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” The promise of salvation was fulfilled through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is no other way to know God apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone'. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:10-12)

Salvation was found, and is now only found through Jesus Christ as the head of the New Covenant.

The second theological implication was an understanding of the body of Christ. The covenants of the Old Testament brought together a mixed group of people. The church, unlike Israel, is new because she is comprised of a regenerate, believing people rather than a mixed group.¹⁰ There are only one people of God. “But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Having become believers in Jesus Christ, and therefore become the people of God, we are the body of Christ. Paul summarizes this thought when he says, “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also *is* Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:12-13). The new relationship with Jesus Christ as the body has now

¹⁰Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 685.

connected all believers. We were not created to live and work alone. We were created to live in community with one another under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The foundational work of Acts 2:42-47 gave a foundation for the new life we live together, but the fact still remains that believers are connected, and as the church works together, the body of Christ – believers, grows as each one does their part.

We were created to live in community as the body of Christ. “But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph 4:15-16).

The third theological implication was servanthood. We are servants within the covenant relationship.¹¹ There were many biblical individuals who designated themselves as servants upon entering their new relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul was the primary. In the introduction of his letters he introduced himself as, “a bondservant of Jesus Christ.” This was an understanding of servant. A servant lives to please the head and not to please other people. This may sound strange given the function of a servant is generally understood as serving other people, but in a covenant relationship our duty was to serve the one who provided the covenant relationship to start with.

The foundation for servanthood, living as a servant of Jesus Christ, rests on the theology of the body of Jesus. With Jesus as the head of the body He is our head too. As our head, He is to be served, but we serve Him while we serve others.

For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give

¹¹Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 390.

You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' (Matt 25:35-40)

One of the basics of covenant relationship within the church as outlined in Acts 2:42-47, is mutual care. To care for others is to serve them. The function of mutual care defined as service, would ask, “How can the group meet their needs?” or “How can I as a group member meet their needs?” Without the servant understanding, needs would not be met. With the connection with Jesus Christ and the new covenant, if covenant members were not serving other covenant members, then Christ would not be served. Servanthood is a key theological element of a covenant relationship.

Personal Reflections

I am very grateful for the privilege to study through this program. Even though the program has changed a number of times to evolve for a new day, it has been a growing experience. This journey has been a huge challenge. During the past 3 ½ years there have been great challenges at Beaver Creek Baptist Church and in my personal life. While working through this program, church life has been challenging. Some people have been upset. Staff members and some church families left the church. One of the greatest struggles was the people who left without allowing for a time of peace and restoration. It became very hard to concentrate when hateful things were being said of me. In our personal life, my wife and I have a special needs daughter who, at times, has been the greatest challenge of our thirty-year marriage, but is also a blessing from God. We love her and want the best for her, but sometimes the challenge was so great that it made it hard to concentrate on the work needing to be done. I can always find time to do what needs to be done, but it was hard to have a clear mind to think, and write when distractions abound.

It is amazing how the topic of many of the seminars fit right where life was at the time at my church. During one seminar there was a discussion about trusting church people to do the work of ministry together. I have been hurt so much and so deeply by church people that I had gotten to a place where I did not trust any of them. For the first time in over thirty years I cried and gave the pain over to the Lord.

The motivation for me to take this journey was based on two things. First, was a feeling that maybe I deserved how people treated me because I was not a good pastor. I wanted to learn for myself if how we do church had changed. Maybe things have changed and I got left behind. This journey reminded me that we are created to live in community, and if a church bases all their issues on their pastor alone, then they have no understanding of community. There are pastors who cause trouble and are not following the Lord. I can truly say I have not acted out of spite.

Second, this program has confirmed in me a passion for ministry in a team environment and the value of small groups in the local church. What this means is that there are some churches where I will not do well serving on staff.

Conclusion

As of the completion of this project I am 52 years old, and I should have approximately twenty years left to serve the Lord in some leadership capacity. I want those years to be as successful as possible. For me success is following the leading of the Lord and experiencing the presence of the Lord in my life first, and then in the church second. So many churches today are stuck and need someone to guide them to their future. I pray the Lord uses me to be that leader and guide.

I am not sure what the future holds for me. I do know that I will be serving the Lord and will have a passion for community in the local church. There can be community in the church as a whole, but there must also be biblical community in small groups in the local church.

APPENDIX 1

DEVELOPING BIBLICAL COMMUNITY THROUGH SMALL GROUPS ASSESSMENT TOOL

Agreement to participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your current understanding of biblical community in small groups, your current practice of biblical community in small groups, and your current feelings towards biblical community in small groups. This research is being conducted by John Alan Heading for the purposes of a ministry project at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and for the Beavercreek Baptist Church in Beavercreek, Ohio. For the purposes of this research, you will be asked to answer the following questions before and after we provide teaching on biblical community in small groups. Any information or responses that you offer will be strictly anonymous and you will not be asked to give your name unless you are a church leader and agree to be interviewed regarding your responses. Participation in this project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.

Please provide the following demographic information:

1. Please provide your date of birth in numeric form (Ex. 11271962 for November, 27, 1962) to be used as identification during the project: _____
2. How long have you attended Beavercreek Baptist Church? _____
3. Are you currently serving as a leader in the ministry of Beavercreek Baptist Church?
YES or NO. (A church leader would be one who is a teacher, deacon, ministry leader, committee chairman, Church Leadership Team, etc.)
4. Would you be willing to be interviewed by the pastor regarding your thoughts about this process and your thoughts on biblical community? YES or NO

If, YES, please leave a contact email, phone number and name

5. Are you currently involved in a small group at BBC of at least three out of four Sunday's a month? YES or NO
6. Did you begin participating in a small group at least three out of four Sunday's, during this campaign? YES, NO, I was already regularly participating in a small group.

Pre- and post-project questions.

I. Current understanding of biblical community in small groups

For this section, participants will respond to the following options by circling your response:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree				
SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA				
1. Our understanding of “being set apart” for the Lord comes from an understanding of covenants in the Old Testament				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2. Participating in covenant community in small groups brings with it certain obligations of me.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3. With the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, our sense of community is now found in Him.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4. A small group meeting in homes during the week is just as valid as a Sunday School class meeting at the church on Sunday morning.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. Our community in Jesus Christ is to be lived-out in the example of Jesus Christ.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. The purpose of small groups is to function in community together under the Lord.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. A good small group leader is someone who has established good character with God, in their personal life and with others.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8. The Bible teaches clear principles leading Christians to be involved in small groups.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. The Bible provides foundational principles for small group life.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. Small group principles can be applied culturally, therefore they may not look the same every time.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. Bible study is the primary purpose of small groups.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. Fellowship in a small group is centered around the relationships we have with each other in that group.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. Eating with each other in small groups can be a community building function.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. Sharing the Lord’s Supper can be done and have the same meaning in a small group as it does in the large				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

group, worship service setting.

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 15. Praying in front of others in a small group is a sign of trust in your fellow group members. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. Jesus and the disciples existed to work together to meet the needs of each other and others outside their group. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 17. Praising God in worship can be accomplished outside of the corporate worship service and does not necessarily require music. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

II. Current practice of biblical community in small groups

For this section, participants will respond to how many times in the past 16 weeks, have you done the action indicated in the question. If it is more than 16 times in the last 16 weeks, mark 17+.

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----|
| 1. In the past 16 weeks, I have attended a small group at BBC. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 2. In the past 16 weeks, I have prayed with other people, for other people. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 3. In the past 16 weeks, I have spent deliberate time in prayer for myself and others. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 4. In the past 16 weeks, my small group and I have worked to meet the needs of those in the group. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 5. In the past 16 weeks, my small group and I have worked to meet the needs of those outside our group. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 6. In the past 16 weeks, I have spent time with a member(s) of a small group outside the regular meeting time. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |
| 7. In the past 16 weeks, I have learned a new truth or a new application of God's word in a small group. | 0 | 1-3 times | 4-6 times | 7-9 times | 10-12 times | 13-16 times | 17+ |

8. In the past 16 weeks, I have altered my life practice based on lessons learned in my small group.
- 0 1-3 times 4-6 times 7-9 times 10-12 times 13-16 times 17+
9. In the past 16 weeks, how often did you attend a morning worship service at BBC?
- 0 1-3 times 4-6 times 7-9 times 10-12 times 13-16 times 17+
10. In the past 16 weeks, I have invited someone new to attend my small group.
- 0 1-3 times 4-6 times 7-9 times 10-12 times 13-16 times 17+
11. In the past 16 weeks, I have shared a meal with the small group or with a small group member.
- 0 1-3 times 4-6 times 7-9 times 10-12 times 13-16 times 17+
12. In the past 16 weeks, how many times have you heard about a need from a fellow small group member and then took it upon yourself to meet that need?
- 0 1-3 times 4-6 times 7-9 times 10-12 times 13-16 times 17+

III. Current perceptions towards biblical community in small groups

For this section, participants will respond to the following options by circling your response:

- | | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 1. Participation in a small group will help me grow spiritually. | | | | | SD | D DS AS A SA |
| 2. It is important for me to participate in a small group. | | | | | SD | D DS AS A SA |
| 3. I is important share my life issues with others for support and encouragement. | | | | | SD | D DS AS A SA |
| 4. Small group participation is for people who need a crutch to handle life. | | | | | SD | D DS AS A SA |
| 5. I believe I would feel refreshed & encouraged after a small group experience. | | | | | SD | D DS AS A SA |

APPENDIX 2

ONLINE SURVEY FOR SMALL GROUPS LEADERS

The following survey is an online survey utilizing Survey monkey.com and will be taken by the adult small group leaders. Questions are all True or False.

1. Active involvement through small group ministry is a decision and does not happen by accident.
2. Devotion is a qualifier to small group involvement as indicated in Acts 2:42-47.
3. Bible Study is a biblical characteristic of small group ministry.
4. Fellowship is a biblical characteristic of small group ministry.
5. The Biblical Characteristics for Small Group Ministry should exist within each small group, but can be applied culturally.
6. Where a small group meets is not the primary issue.
7. Prayer is a biblical characteristic of small group ministry.
8. Gossip is a biblical characteristic of small group ministry.
9. Eating together is a biblical characteristic of small group ministry.
10. The result of living devoted to the characteristics of small group life is an attitude of praising God and experiencing the favor of those outside the group.

APPENDIX 3

PERSONAL INTERVIEW OF SELECTED PARTICIPANTS

1. Are you a leader in the church?

2. How would you characterize the survey?

Was it hard, easy, or difficult to judge how to answer? Please explain your response.

3. Are you currently involved in small groups at BBC?

If yes, what motivated you to get involved?

If no, why not?

4. What did you learn through the survey and/or preaching series? Please explain.

5. Were there any issues of disagreement with you and the material? Please explain.

APPENDIX 4

BEAVERCREEK BAPTIST CHURCH DYNAMIC CHARACTERISTICS FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

August 2014

The Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry was derived from Acts 2:42-47.

I. Qualifier for Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry

Devoted – Active involvement through small group ministry is a decision and does not happen by accident. As Christians we are to actively seek devotion to the Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry indicated in Acts 2:42-47.

II. Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry

- A. Devoted to Bible study
- B. Devoted to Fellowship
- C. Devoted to Breaking of Bread
- D. Devoted to Prayer
- E. Devoted to Mutual Care

III. Result

“Praising God and the favor of all the people” (2:47)

In Principle:

The Dynamic Characteristics for Small Group Ministry should all exist within each small group, but can be applied culturally. For example, Christians can be devoted to Bible Study in Sunday School Classes or in Homes, but the focus is bible study. Where a small group meets is not the primary issue.

APPENDIX 5

“BIBLICAL COMMUNITY THROUGH SMALL GROUPS” A PREACHING SERIES

Sermon 1: “We Were Made for Covenant Community” June 22, 2014

Introduction

There are many M&M’s to enjoy. (28 types in all)
Which is the best? Who likes what kind?

Let’s take the regular M&M’s, and say they are the chosen kind.
They are my chosen M&M’s.
The others are OK, but regular M&M’s are my choice.

Like the illustration of a chosen type of M&M, God chose Israel as his ‘chosen people’
to be in covenant relationship with Him.

I. Covenant Foundation

A. God Established Community in the Old Testament through Covenant.

Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

B. God took the initiative to create the cosmos and God took the initiative to create man. Man had a special relationship with God as Adam was created with the capacity, and necessity for relating to God. The Divine made a creature with which He could interact.

C. God interacted with the man by giving him a place to ‘tend and keep’.

However, it was not good for man to be alone so the Creator creates a helper for man, woman. So, man, woman, and God interacted in the Garden. This was the first community between man and God. From this first community progressing to the establishment of covenants in the Old Testament, and the establishment of the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, God has ordained His people to function in biblical community.

Through the creation of the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9, the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15, and the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19, God established community in the Old Testament that laid the foundation for community in the New Testament through the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. These four covenants, along with the Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1-2, and the Covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89

constitute the six major covenants of scripture. These covenants stand alone as individual covenants, but also fit together as the backbone of the biblical narrative.

D. Israel's relationship with God is most frequently seen in terms of covenant.

A covenant is a binding and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals to do or not to do specific things. For example, a marriage agreement, a legal contract between two parties, etc.

The covenants related of Noah, Abraham, and Moses. In these covenants God established a means to separate His people from all the other people in the world. This separation brought with it a divine relationship, and a divine responsibility. There were blessings to obey the covenant, and cursing for disobeying the covenant.

Gentry and Wellum in their work, *Kingdom through Covenant*, layout these four covenants and the significance each played.

God judged the entire human race and made a new start with Noah. This too ended up in chaos and evil. He made a fresh start with Abraham. He would restore a creation and humanity ruined by pride and rebellion by using Abraham and his family as a pilot project. The people of Israel would be an example, a light to the world of what it means to be properly related to God and to treat each other properly according to the dignity of our humanity. We may call this the Mosaic covenant. But the people of Israel did not keep the Mosaic covenant. This is why the biblical story ends up talking about a new covenant.

II. The Covenants

A. Noahic Covenant

The first time the word “covenant” is used in the Bible is in the account of Noah in Genesis 6:1 – 9:17. The central theme is the wickedness of the human race.

1. The text makes it clear that the problem leading to the flood was simply the wickedness of the human heart and the behavior that resulted.

Total depravity can be given then, “every inclination of the thoughts of the heart was only evil all the time.” So God decides to destroy man and beast. The God of the Old Testament never acts arbitrarily. God is moved to anger by man’s deliberate violations of the code by which He wills His world to live.

2. Noah on the other hand is blameless, righteous and walked with the Lord.

He is living in community relationship with God in the midst of such great sin. What can be missed from Noah’s life example is the message of grace. By God’s grace Noah and his family were saved. This grace is formalized in a covenant.

In this covenant there is tension between God and Noah. Can they count on each other? Noah must continue a life of faithfulness to God and actually do what God has asked. The fate of the Ark depends solely on the will of God. If Noah does not build the ark, then not only do Noah, and his family members die, but all mankind as well. The major idea in the account of Noah is the establishment of an unconditional, unilateral covenant.

From this point on, the God of Israel would be known as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

These covenants had stipulations for the people and promises from God. For example, all living creatures are at humankind's disposal for food, as long as the blood is not included; but God will make a covenant to protect all living creatures on the earth. This covenant does not depend on human obedience to the laws given to Noah; rather, men's and women's compliance with the laws will allow them to live and enjoy this covenant.

God initiated the covenant, and God promised to keep the covenant with Noah. The covenant 'set-aside' Noah and his family to live in covenant community with God. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow. This rainbow is a reminder to God (Genesis 9:14-15) of the covenant He forged with Noah. Ultimately all mankind benefits from this covenant, but at its inception the goal was to establish a covenant relationship with Noah.

B. Abrahamic Covenant

The dilemma is if Abraham can trust and if Yahweh can be trusted. Abraham had recently experienced a victory in battle. (Genesis 14)

This covenant begins in Genesis 12:2-3 where God promised Abram he would be blessed and all families of the earth are blessed. For that, God will bring great blessing to Abram and his family. In Genesis 15, God elaborates on the covenant. There are two main components to the covenant in this chapter; a son and land

1. The promise of a biological son to produce many generations

He simply believed that, though he had no children, and no hope of having any, God could make his offspring as the star of the sky. The human partner counts on God to give him offspring, and the divine partner credits that faith as righteous. On that basis, the Lord grants Abraham his immutable covenant.

Genesis 15:6 should be seen as the premise on which the covenant is ratified. Because Abram takes God at his word, God credits him with a legacy on the basis of the rightness of this faith. He accomplishes this by formally establishing the covenant with him.

2. God giving Abram's descendants land.

This portion of the covenant Abram will not experience since it will come some 400 years later. The 400 hundred year prophecy is important. God shows Abram that there will be 400 years before the possession of the land. It will take time for the Amorites to fulfill their doom, and God will judge them and Egypt as well. For Abram to see all this was horrible, but helpful. Abram and his descendents would know that such oppression and enslavement was not a threat to the fulfillment of the promise – it was of the divine plan.

The promise of God fulfilling His covenant comes in the vision of the sacrifice (Gen 15). God had him take the sacrifice animals, cut them in half, and split them on the ground. Walking between the split halves was a sign of commitment to the covenant. The predominant verb associated with covenant making is *karath*, "to cut."

Just like Noah lived righteously, and was rewarded with the Noahic Covenant by the Lord, Abraham must walk before the Lord. In fact, only after Abraham shows his total commitment to the Lord by his willingness to offer up Isaac as sacrifice does God take an oath to fulfill this covenant (Gen 22:15-18).

C. Mosaic Covenant

1. The first verses of Exodus 19:3-6 suggest that the covenant with Moses is very much the act of Yahweh. The Noahic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant lead history to this point with Moses.

'Covenant' in Exodus 19:5 refers to what has gone before, namely the covenant with the patriarchs.

2. Exodus 2:24-25, "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."

Exodus is about God keeping a promise He made to Abraham. What is about to transpire is not a new covenant, but the continuation and deepening of an existing covenant.

3. Exodus 19:4-6 is a summary of the covenant.
4. The whole covenant is spelled out in Exodus 20-Lev. 27:27.

The Israelites are not keeping the law in order for God to save them. They have already been saved; God has brought them out of Egypt. It is what is expected of a people already redeemed. The people do not earn their salvation; but once saved, they are obligated to act in a manner worthy of their high calling.

However, Israel's response to God to enter into covenant is voluntary. He does not force them to make it. God is creator but His intention is to create for Himself a particular people. The covenant represents the separation of His chosen people from the general world population, the beginning of the outworking of his intention to bring close to Himself a people that will join Him for all eternity as adopted members of his family.

D. The New Covenant

The covenant with Noah saved Noah and his family and in effect, saved all generations to come to be in community with God. The covenant with Abraham set aside a specific group of people to be in community with Him. That covenant community was taken even further in covenant community with God through the Mosaic Covenant.

These progressive covenants served to guide God's people in covenant community with God. There is however, a new covenant that will be the final covenant, through Jesus Christ. The first place, and the only direct place, a 'New Covenant' is mentioned in the Old Testament is in Jeremiah 31 however, the ideas associated with it are frequently expressed.

1. Jeremiah 31:27-34

In Jeremiah "covenant" is mentioned twenty-three times, referring mainly to the covenant at Sinai. This is important since the covenant at Sinai was binding upon God's people.

The Sinai Covenant or Mosaic Covenant was broken by Israel, and Jeremiah is reminding his people of their sin. The nation may have sinned and been taken into captivity, but each person is responsible for the sin they have committed. This individual accountability as well as individual salvation becomes a central theme of the new covenant.

No matter how many rites or practices the Israelites participate in, they will never be right with God. The fundamental cause of disobedience and idolatry is stubbornness of the human heart.

2. The consequence of sin.

The nation of Israel sinned before Yahweh. They broke the covenant they swore to keep and have been punished. Their punishment involved being taken captive, and taken from their homeland, a homeland that God had promised, and provided for them to inhabit. Hope was integral to Jeremiah's preaching. Judgment was never an end in itself, but the means Yahweh used to bring Israel into a new and lasting relationship.

What Jesus was about to do, suffer and die for forgiveness of sins for all his followers was new in many ways, but it didn't make sense apart from the background of God's dealings with Israel for years. Jesus stated He didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. He came to bring the law into its' full intent. Jesus taught his followers what this will look like through the teaching of the Passover.

3. The Passover

The Passover was an annual celebration of Israel's redemption from Egypt. (Exodus. 12-13) With this redemption came the establishment of the covenant that was sealed with sacrificial blood. (Exodus 19-24)

But with the death of Jesus an even greater act of redemption is accomplished, and from now on it is the covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus that believers look to as they anticipate the future coming of the kingdom of God.

The New Covenant - Hebrews 8-10

Established in the blood of Christ and fulfills all laws, and covenants of the past. This is what all the covenants have been leading up to.

Week 2: “Jesus and Small Group Community” June 29, 2014

Introduction

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

I. Lord’s Supper

A. The Lesson

Initially a lesson to reveal how the New Covenant was to be sealed: Body & Blood. This generation had not gone through the Passover & Exodus themselves. Passover, when the Death Angel ‘passed-over’ the homes of those who had put the blood on their door posts as a sign of obedience to God while captives in Israel. Those who did not, the first-born of the house died. Pharaoh then let the Israelites go and the exodus from Egypt to the promise land began

So Jesus gathered his closest disciples and shared the Lord’s Supper with them (Mt 26:26-30). The New Covenant, a covenant of salvation by God through Jesus Christ and like the other covenants had to be sealed by a blood sacrifice. Mt 26:28, “this is my blood of the covenant.” As the blood sacrifice of the Old Testament covenants made it possible to participate in the covenants, so the blood sacrifice of Jesus makes it possible for us to participate in this new covenant

B. The Abuse

1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

The gathering for the Lord’s Supper had become a drunken, privileged event. Jesus taught and practiced the Lord’s Supper with the inner-circle, small group as a way to remember the sacrifice that would be given for them.

The large-group church had turned it into something it was not, of which there is a judgment: 1 Cor. 11:27-34. Small group or large group – the Lord’s Supper carries the same meaning and illustration.

C. The Remembrance

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

This seal and symbol of the New, and final covenant reminds us of a way to be in relationship with our creator, through Jesus. That’s why we preach Jesus. That’s why songs are about Jesus. That’s why it’s about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Repent, follow Christ, and participate in the New Covenant with its promises.

TR> From Jesus we can learn about living the Christian life.

II. With Jesus

After Jesus left Earth for Heaven in Acts 1, those who followed Jesus continued to follow the teachings of Jesus. From Jesus’ parting to when Mark was written, bits & pieces of Jesus’ teachings had been circulated. People wanted to know why follow a leader who is now dead?

Groups formed. Small-groups turned into “churches” foundationally, once a believer professed faith in Jesus Christ and committed to follow Him, believers were drawn to each other. We are created to live in community. We also possess the desire to be in community as God’s creation.

Illustrations of misplaced community:

-Online Community – share your life with strangers on Facebook (intimate things) community surrounding a hobby or sport.

-Humanist Community near Harvard University - Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain has started a group resembling a Sunday morning worship service but with no god.

Purpose: Community- “a really close-knit, strong community that can make strong change happen in the world” community without the creator=

-London, England – Sunday Assembly for those who have left the faith but miss gathering on Sunday morning. “It’s not a church. It’s a congregation of unreligious people.” One participant, “I think people need that sense of connectedness because everyone is so singular right now, and to be part of something and to feel like you are part of something. That’s what people are craving in the world”

Sociologists have studied and learned that humans need small groupings for survival, support, emotional strength, and stimulation. Small Group Theory helps to explain this.

We are created, by God to form community. Large group and small group. Both!! We can deny it all we want, but we live this way.

What about Jesus’ participation in community life?

A. Concentric Circles

1. Outer Circle – repented, committed lives to follow the teachings of Jesus.
Did not leave jobs or lives to follow Jesus.
Stayed in regular lives to perpetuate the teachings of Christ.

2. Inner Circle – the disciples of Jesus

Jesus chose them.

This is an example of covenant community.

Jesus & Disciples had responsibility in relationship.

Mark 1:16-20 (You follow, I will teach)

Lived together, ministered together. They learned to follow & serve.

This inner circle was Jesus’ small group. Small groups have a relationship to the large group or the inner circle has a relationship to the outer circle. Small group – large group rhythm= small group providing intense, more accountable community life that gave depth to the larger-group gatherings.

SERMON ILLUSTRATION

The Power of Community in an AA Group

Gordon MacDonald shares the following story about visiting a small group of men and women affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous. MacDonald said that he visited the group

because he has friends who are recovering alcoholics and he wanted to see for himself what they were talking about. Here's what he found:

One morning Kathy—I guessed her age at 35—joined us for the first time. One look at her face caused me to conclude that she must have been Hollywood-beautiful at 21. Now her face was swollen, her eyes red, her teeth rotting. Her hair looked unwashed, uncombed for who knows how long.

"I've been in five states in the past month," she said. "I've slept under bridges on several nights. Been arrested. Raped. Robbed (now weeping). I don't know what to do. I ... don't ... want ... to ... be ... homeless ... any more. But (sob) I can't stop drinking (sob). I can't stop (sob). I can't ... "

Next to Kathy was a rather large woman, Marilyn, sober for more than a dozen years. She reached with both arms toward Kathy and pulled her close, so close that Kathy's face was pressed to Marilyn's ample breast. I was close enough to hear Marilyn speak quietly into Kathy's ear, "Honey, you're going to be OK. You're with us now. We can deal with this together. All you have to do is keep coming. Hear me? Keep on coming." And then Marilyn kissed the top of Kathy's head.

I was awestruck. The simple words, the affection, the tenderness. How Jesus-like. I couldn't avoid a troubling question that morning. Could this have happened in the places where I have worshiped? Would there have been a space in the program for Kathy to tell her story? Would there have been a Marilyn to respond in this way?

3. Teaching Examples

Mark 10:45. It's not about position or authority – it's about serving

Matthew 6:33 "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness."
Or "Seek His control and be in right status with Him" and the other things you worry about will come.

B. The Work of Christ

The overall work of Christ is as the sacrificial lamb for the New Covenant. What was the work of Christ related to the inner-circle his disciples? (John 17:4-8).

"I have brought you glory by finishing the work you gave me to do"
Finish what? Jesus had NOT gone to the cross yet.

Jesus' mission was to teach the inner circle then send them out to do the same.
(Done in small group community)

Conclusion:

1. Jesus is the seal of the New Covenant
2. The New Covenant is
3. Jesus interacted with the large group / outer circle
4. Jesus lived-out life in the inner circle for ministry, service and relationship.

5. We should follow the example of Jesus.

Participate in the large group setting – Group Worship

Participate in small group setting – for us right now it is Sunday morning.

We will explore the dimension of small group life in the next few weeks.

Do I have to participate in small groups? Yes, if you want to experience the Christian life that is biblical and practical for today. Yes.

Small group – large group rhythm= small group providing intense, more accountable community life that gave depth to the larger-group gatherings.

Week 3: “The Church That Started It All” July 6, 2014

Introduction

Although Sunday School model of classroom focused small groups has been around for a long time, the vision of small groups is changing. Philip Nation, Director of Adult Ministry Publishing for Lifeway Christian Resources, sees seven changes in the future. They are:

1. Concept: Shift from 1 hour to 1 week.
2. Framework: Shift from organization to leadership development.
3. Involvement: Shift from caste to freedom.
4. Type: Shift from type to community.
5. Perspective: Shift from meeting to ministry.
6. Reason: Shift from teaching to transformation.
7. Goal: Shift from gathering to scattering.

All of these shifts give an understanding that small group community is more than an hour of talking and study with a donut thrown in. If mankind is truly created with a desire to fulfill community, then community fulfillment cannot be accomplished in a neatly packaged, one-hour timeslot. The focus is becoming more about what the small group is about rather than the specific functions performed. Small group should not be defined by what size they are, when they meet, what they produce, or what they study; instead they should be defined by the objectives of what they aim to accomplish.

Acts 2:42-47 has become the primary biblical focus for small group ministry.

Throughout history there have been many takes on this pivotal passage. Looking at the basics of the passage there are four objectives of small groups:

(1) teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) breaking of bread and (4) prayer.

I. How have other ministries applied this passage?

A. Saddleback Community Church

Steve Gladen, Pastor of the Small Group Community at Saddleback Church, has taken this same Acts 2:42-47 passage and outlined five objectives or purposes of small groups. For Gladen they are: (1) fellowship, (2) discipleship, (3) ministry, (4) evangelism and (5) worship.

B. Mars Hill Church

Brad House, Mars Hill Church, Seattle. He takes the Acts 2:42-47 passage and outlines seven objectives or community elements. They are: (1) Bible study, (2) confession and repentance, (3) worship, (4) prayer, (5) hospitality, (6) exercise of Spiritual gifts and (7) mission.

These basic objectives should be used to guide any small group community in a Bible-believing church. How these objectives are put into practice is something that should be cultural, not methodological. What works for a church in California may not work for a

church in rural Alabama. People all have the same innate desire for community, but how that is applied to a specific church is filtered through the culture of the church and the community.

We have a Midwest, military, multi-cultural flavor. Here, businesses offer military discounts to come to their business, other places do not. The key is that every small group has good, biblical foundations.

C. Yoido Full Gospel Church.

The largest church in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. This mega church of over 800,000 organizes cell groups of five to ten families to provide an intimate setting for Bible study, discussion and prayer. When asked how the cell group structure fits into the program of the church, Pastor David Cho said, "The cell group is the program of the church."

II. 7 Characteristics of Biblical Small Groups

1) Meeting together in a small group

"They devoted themselves." Acts 2:42 (NIV). To experience biblical community in small groups, there must be active participation. In a 2008 sample of mega-church attendees 60 percent indicated participation in a small group for prayer and Bible study. It requires a devotion to the task and not simply a half-hearted attempt to participate when the chance arises.

2) Study the Bible together

"To the apostles teaching," Acts 2:42 (NIV). The foundation of any small group that wants to realize community with the Creator and each other must be grounded in the study of the Bible together. The Bible is the foundation of belief and practice and must be at the center of all the group studies.

3) Fellowship

"And to fellowship," Acts 2:42 (NIV). Fellowship is the glue that holds the group together. It is a sense of belonging and relationship together. Fellowship is created as group members participate in life together.

4) Break Bread Together

"To the breaking of bread," Acts 2:42b. "They broke bread in their homes and ate together." Acts 2:46a (NIV). To eat a meal together in a small group and to participate in the Lord's Supper together are ways to communicate in small group community.

5) Prayer

"And to prayer," Acts 2:42b (NIV). Prayer is a vehicle to communicate and commune with God. God will not force Himself on anyone so prayer is an opportunity to seek the Lord and give freedom for God to intervene in our lives and the lives of others.

6) Mutual care

“They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” Acts 2:45 (NIV). Mutual care is a way for God’s people to share the blessings God has given to meet the needs of those in the small group, as well as those outside the group.

7) Praising God

“Glad and sincere hearts, praising God.” Worship is more than music. Worship can be described as a life devoted to and lived for God. These seven small group practices should appear, in some way, in small group ministries. They will ultimately bring about a transformation of individuals to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

III. “Devoted Themselves”

A. To Be devoted

Devoted = to be committed to a thing to the point of being blunt. It requires a devotion to the task, and not simply a half-hearted attempt to participate when the chance arises. Christian Business Examples:

1. Hobby Lobby = refused to pay for ‘some’ medications that were abortive medications (4 drugs) Supreme Court ruled they can run their business by their principles. There are other ways for their employees to get those drugs if they want them.
2. Chic-Fil-A = closed on Sunday.

Illustration:

In 1970, while Bob Russell was a graduate student at Temple University in Philadelphia, his 1967 Austin Healey sports car was stolen. Over the years, Russell kept the original title to the car and the keys, and he memorized the vehicle identification number. During a sleepless night on May 11, 2012, Russell got out of bed and began surfing the internet. While browsing eBay, he saw his old car for sale. After contacting the seller, getting a copy of the old police report through the National Crime Information Center, securing the assistance of the Philadelphia Police Department, and haggling with the seller over the buy-back price, Bob Russell and his wife Cynthia flew to California and took back ownership of the car on June 18, 2012. Though the VIN plate had been removed, and the glove box lock had been broken, and the lock to the trunk was missing, he was delighted to get his car back. Russell commented, "When it was stolen it was pristine; now it's going to need a lot of work. On the other hand, it's been more than 40 years. It's very gratifying to get it back."

When we are devoted to something, we will do just about anything for that cause. The relationship is more than a passing whim. There is conviction. There is determination. Being devoted as a Christian is not just about Sunday morning. When God is first, the activity with the church has a different devotion. When our devotion is to the events or service first, then participation will wain.

Living the life of a Christian is not dedication to a program or method. We are devoted to Christ first. That is what should motivate us. Our devotion to Christ brings us together and then as a church decisions are made how to live-out that devotion.

If we are not careful, a once strong devotion to the Lord and we misdirected.

B. To Lose devotion

1 Kings 11:3-4 (NIV)

³ He (Solomon) had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. ⁴ As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

¹¹ So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.

We can lose our devotion to the Lord when we allow ourselves to be distracted. Western culture silo's God. Eastern culture their religious beliefs are a continual thread in their lives. When God says NO, its NO.

There are many examples of devotion in the Bible. Here are a few:

C. Biblical Examples

1. Paul Devoted to Preaching

Acts 18:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. ⁶ But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

He didn't stop preaching because the Jews wouldn't listen. He just went and preached to those who would listen. He was still devoted regardless of others.

2. Jehoshaphat led the people to be devoted to God again.

2 Chronicles 17:6 (NIV)

⁶ His heart was devoted to the ways of the LORD; furthermore, he removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah.

D. The Fruit of Our Devotion

The fruit of our devotion may not reveal itself in our lifetime.

Illustration:

The American missionary Adoniram Judson arrived in Burma, or Myanmar, in 1812, and died there thirty-eight years later in 1850. During that time, he suffered much for the cause of the gospel. He was imprisoned, tortured, and kept in shackles. After the death of his first wife, Ann, to whom he was devoted, for several months he was so depressed that he sat daily beside her tomb. Three years later, he wrote: God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I cannot find him.

But Adoniram's faith sustained him, and he threw himself into the tasks to which he believed God had called him. He worked feverishly on his translation of the Bible. The New Testament had now been printed, and he finished the Old Testament in early 1834. Statistics are unclear, but there were only somewhere between twelve and twenty-five professing Christians in the country when he died, and there were no churches to speak of.

At the 150th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into the Burmese language, Paul Borthwick was addressing a group that was celebrating Judson's work. Just before he got up to speak, he noticed in small print on the first page the words: "Translated by Rev. A. Judson." So Borthwick turned to his interpreter, a Burmese man named Matthew Hia Win, and asked him, "Matthew, what do you know of this man?" Matthew began to weep as he said,

We know him—we know how he loved the Burmese people, how he suffered for the gospel because of us, out of love for us. He died a pauper, but left the Bible for us. When he died, there were few believers, but today there are over 600,000 of us, and every single one of us traces our spiritual heritage to one man: the Rev. Adoniram Judson. But Adoniram Judson never saw it!

And that will be the case for some of us. We may be called to invest our lives in ministries for which we do not see much immediate fruit, trusting that the God of all grace who oversees our work will ensure that our labor is not in vain.

Conclusion

What are you devoted to?

What will be meaningful and really last in life?

To work? There is always another place to go work. Work loyalty isn't very common.
To school? Learning is important, but there's always another degree
To sports? Even if you make the pro's, it won't help you when you are facing death.

These are all good and necessary. We much work, learn, and be productive in life. But if they are the primary focus and they will not last – we will miss the real point.

Christians are to be devoted to Jesus Christ.

To love, worship, follow, devote all of life too.

In the end, Jesus is the only thing that lasts.

**Week 4: “Teaching & Fellowship”
July 13, 2014**

Introduction

Small groups in the church. The large-group, small-group rhythm.

Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread 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. Last week: “They devoted themselves”

Devoted to what? Today: teaching and fellowship

**Golf Classic coming up Aug. 2/scramble format
Play by USGA rules.**

There should be some changes in golf rules to make the game fair for all.

Senior Adult Golf Rules: Finally fairness has prevailed!

The AARP Negotiates with the USGA to Modify the Rules of Golf for Seniors!

Rule 1.a.5

A ball sliced or hooked into the rough shall be lifted and placed on the fairway at a point equal to the distance it carried or rolled into the rough with no penalty. The senior should not be penalized for tall grass which groundskeepers failed to mow.

Rule 2.d.6 (b)

A ball hitting a tree shall be deemed not to have hit the tree. This is simply bad luck and luck has no place in a scientific game. The senior player must estimate the distance the ball would have traveled if it had not hit the tree and play the ball from there.

IE> my ball in a tree. (Show tree first. Then close-up of tree with ball.)

Rule 3.b.3 (g)

There shall be no such thing as a lost ball; the missing ball is on or near the course and will eventually be found and pocketed by someone else, making it a stolen ball. The player is not to compound the felony by charging himself or herself with a penalty.

Rule 4.c.7 (h)

If a putt passes over a hole without dropping, it is deemed to have dropped. The law of gravity supersedes the Rules of Golf.

Unfortunately, we have to play by the rules. USGA rules.

What directives do we follow in life?

2 Timothy 3:10-17 (NIV)

¹⁰You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, sufferings--what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I. Devoted to Teaching

Reliable guidance can be found in the Bible.

A. Cultural Thoughts on the Bible

Age	Bible is a sacred book	No books should be considered sacred	Bible, Koran, Book of Mormon offer same spiritual truths	In the last seven days, have read bible not including at church or synagogue	Spent time completely alone, praying and reading bible for 15+ minutes
18-25	67%	17%	56%	40%	29%
26-44	81%	11%	43%	43%	32%
45-63	89%	6%	45%	44%	43%
64+	90%	5%	33%	55%	53%

2006-2009, 5 studies with n=1000+, sampling error between ±1.4 and ±3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level
<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible?q=bible>

Age	Actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word	Inspired word of God, no errors, some verses symbolic	Inspired word of God, has some historical or factual errors	Bible is not inspired by God, tells how writers understood the ways, principles of God	Just another book written by man containing stories and advice
18-25	27%	36%	11%	12%	13%
26-44	27%	26%	25%	8%	11%
45-63	23%	36%	16%	12%	10%
64+	34%	23%	15%	13%	9%
Avg	26%	30%	18%	11%	11%

2006-2009, 5 studies with n=1000+, sampling error between ±1.4 and ±3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level
<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible?q=bible>

B. All Scripture is God-breathed

Theories of Inspiration:

1. Intuition Theory: The writers of the Bible exhibit a natural religious intuition that is also found in other great philosophers or religious thinkers, such as Confucius or Plato.

2. Illumination Theory: The Spirit of God in some way did objectively impress himself upon the consciousness of the biblical writers but not in a way that is essentially different from the way the Spirit communicates with all humanity (only in the degree is the Spirit's influence different but not in kind).

3. Dynamic Theory: God gave definite, specific impressions or concepts to the biblical authors but allowed the writers to communicate those concepts in their own words. That is, the exact phrasing of Scripture is due to human choice, while the main tenor of the content is determined by God.

4. Dictation Theory: God dictated the exact words to the human authors [like court stenographers]. The authors exercised no human volition in the composition of their writings.

5. Verbal Plenary Theory: God used human authors with their experiences, education, vocabulary, way of thinking and feeling in such a way that he mysteriously superintended the writing process so that every word written was also the exact word he wanted to be written—without error.

C. The End Result

“Complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Every work the Lord places upon us is a ‘good work’

Volunteering at a block party -
Taking care of the needy – food, clothes, etc.
Taking on a ministry function in the church
Taking a stand for what is right when others are shooting at you.

God's work is good work. How do you know if it is God's work? Does it violate the Bible? Woman testified that God told her to kill her daughter. Biblical? NO.

What is the Bible good for?

D. Useful for . . .

Inspired= lit. “God breathed”

In Adam ‘God breathed’ the breath of life. Gen 2:7

Jesus breathed in to the disciples the Holy Spirit. John 20:22

The life was in the breath

Inspiration = a truth from God that they could not have come up with themselves.

‘doctrine- teaching

‘reproof’- convincing a man of his sins

‘correction’- correcting of life, reformed

‘instruction’ – how we may lead an upright life.

In our church and small groups we must be dedicated to the word of God as the primary source of truth for life & thought.

II. Fellowship

God's plan was to form us together as believers as a family. In that family we are to learn to love each other. Our earthly family will fade, but our heavenly family will last forever!!

Why family:

Makes us more like God. God wants his children to learn to get along. This is practice for eternity. "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers.." 1 Peter 2:17

Fellowship is _____ loving God's family _____
"Church is not a place you go but a family you belong to"

The devotion of believers in the Acts church was an 'all-in' devotion. For us, we work up to the deepest level of fellowship.

FOUR LEVELS OF FELLOWSHIP

LEVEL 1: MEMBERSHIP _____ Choosing to Belong _____

This is the most basic level. Find a church and chose to belong.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" Eph 2:19 (NIV)

People say they are Christians but they don't need a church, impossible! In the church family is where we live out what it means to be a believer.

"So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Romans 12:5

LEVEL 2: FRIENDSHIP: _____ Learning to share _____

Life is not designed for us to live alone. "All the believers were together and had everything in common" Acts 2:44. You can't develop friendships without meeting together. You can't develop friendships without sharing. It's not luck when people have lasting relationships

What do we share?:

Our _____ Experiences _____

We learn from others experiences.

Our _____ Homes _____

Something about a small group that builds relationships.

Our _____ Problems _____

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" Gal 6:2. Doesn't say fix them, but share them. Compassion. friendship.

LEVEL 3: PARTNERSHIP: _____ DOING MY PART _____

Realize I have a contribution to make. God brought us together to serve together. Every family has a family responsibility for the good of the family.

“For we are God's fellow workers” 1 Cor 3:9.

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” Eph 4:16.

LEVEL 4: KINSHIP: _____ LOVING BELIEVERS LIKE FAMILY _____

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” Acts 2:42.

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves” Romans 12:10.

Biblical term for fellowship is koinonia. It means committed to each other as we are to Christ.

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” John 13:35.

In the church and in small groups we should be devoted to fellowship.

A relationship together that rivals the family.

Week 5: “Breaking Bread & Prayer” July 20, 2014

Introduction

Read Acts 2:42-47

So Far. . . .

1. The covenant connection.
2. The New Covenant is found in Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus lived in a large-group, small-group rhythm.
4. How did the early church do?
Not so much about the ‘method’ but basic elements.
Application is cultural.
5. They. . .
 - a. were devoted
 - b. devoted to:
 - i. the Apostles teaching
 - ii. fellowship

Today we will take a look at the breaking of bread and prayer.
Then, mutual care and praising God.

I. Breaking of Bread

Lord’s Supper

“Broke bread in their homes and ate together”

Acts 2:46 (NIV) ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, Why homes? No church buildings. **(PICTURE OF PETER’S HOUSE)**
The Temple for Jewish worship and they continued to meet there until they had to leave.

“In their homes” Mt 8:14 in Peter’s home to heal his mother-in-law. Jesus spent time at Peter’s house. The intension would seem that the small-group is where the intimate meals were eaten. There was also a practice of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus in the small groups as well.

It also may be that a common meal and the Lord’s Supper were done at the same time. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, Paul writes to criticize the church because when they gather to eat and practice the Lord’s Supper, some have taken the event to an unhealthy manner. The rich would eat to excess and humiliate the poor. It became an abuse of both forms of meals.

II. When we pray, what do we pray?

They continued to pray the Jewish prayers, but with a new dimension. Through prayer the community seeks God's direction, and is dependent upon God because God's family of people do not work by feelings or intuition, but actively submitting themselves to the Lord's Direction. Early believers were given to reciting wrote prayers that they had always prayed in the temple, but with new dimensions to praying to the God they are experiencing in a personal way.

A. Many pray only for relief of current issue.

John 17:13-24

¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. ²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ 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. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ "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.

B. Five ways Jesus prayed for the disciples:

1. GIVE THEM protection.

¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

2. GIVE THEM unity.

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.

²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:

²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

3. GIVE THEM joy.

¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.

4. GIVE THEM purity.

¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

5. GIVE THEM a mission.

18As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

C. Jesus taught them to pray: Mt 6:7-15

Matthew 6:7-15 (NIV)

⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' ¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

D. Jesus prayed

1. At his own baptism:

Luke 3:21-22 (NIV)

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

2. He prayed in lonely places:

Luke 5:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

3. Prayed all night before a big decision:

Luke 6:12 (NIV)

¹² One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

4. Prayed with disciples around:

Luke 9:18 (NIV)

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

Luke 11:1 (NIV)

¹ One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Prayer is something we do in private, collectively as a large group, together in small groups. When you trust the people you are with, you can pray outloud.

A Woman Who Always Prayed the Same Prayer

Pastor H.B. Charles tells the following story about a woman he knew who showed up at church and prayed the same simple prayer. "O Lord, thank you Jesus," she prayed week after week. The kids at church would start laughing every time she opened her mouth because they knew it would be the same prayer—"O Lord, thank you Jesus." Finally somebody asked her, "Why do you pray the same little prayer?" She said, "Well, I'm just combining the two prayers that I know. We live in a bad neighborhood and some nights there are bullets flying and I have to grab my daughter and hide on the floor, and

in that desperate state all I know how to cry out is, 'O Lord.' But when I wake up in the morning and see that we're okay I say, 'Thank you Jesus.' When I got to take my baby to the bus stop and she gets on that bus and I don't know what's going to happen to her while she's away, I cry, 'O Lord.' And then when 3:00 P.M. comes and that bus arrives and my baby is safe, I say, 'Thank you Jesus.'"

She said, "Those are the only two prayers I know and when I get to church God has been so good I just put my two prayers together, "O Lord, thank you Jesus."

Week 6: “The Community at Work”
July 27, 2014

Introduction

READ Acts 2:42-47

I am very proud of this church. For many things but especially during the last couple months. As a church we do what we do for a reason.

“A great commitment to the great commandment and the great commission”

We are devoted to make disciples, love God and to love others.

Over the last couple months:

1. Car Show. (it took the church together to do that)
2. Youth trip to Myrtle Beach (a few committed people.) No youth leader.
3. Clothing Ministry – pickup, sorting, etc
4. Basketball camp, block parties
5. Vacation Bible School

We are also a church that prays. Committed prayer as a church on Wednesdays and as daily prayer partners. All of these things are the church community at work.

Outcome:

Some have given their lives to Christ.

Some have come to show interest in the ministry of BBC

Some, the seeds of the Gospel have been planted.

Some, those seeds of the Gospel have been watered

These actions show the devotion we have as Christians, and the body of Christ known as Beaver Creek Baptist Church.

Is the organized church necessary – YES, It is biblical

Is the small group necessary – YES, it is biblical

The church has also risen to the occasion to meet the needs of a family in distress.

Thursday at 2:00AM, Mark B. passed away. It was unexpected & tragic. Just 18 years old. A drug overdose. The other details of the situation are not necessary.

If you play with drugs, and you think you can handle it, you can't. It will get you eventually. Mark made a choice. However, there is still a life to remember: the friendships that were shared and the things you remember.

Many of you did not know him, but you can still value the life.

The response to this situation was church-wide:

1. The Borings requested no visitors until after service this week.
2. Through their small group, food was organized for a few days. Neighbors too.
3. Through the large group of the church, 24 people came together yesterday to clean the house they just moved from. They moved 2 weeks ago and had a rental to clean.

This week, funeral service is Tuesday at 5:30 and calling hours from 6-8 after service. Internment will be Thursday at the National Cemetery in a private family service.

All of these things are examples of the church community in action.

It is an example of the Large-Group, Small-group rhythm. Some things done in the small group and other things need everyone.

ILLUSTRATION

At Borings yesterday a man came by to help. He mowed part of the back yard. Turns out a couple of you know him. I invited him to church today, but he indicated he would be at St Luke's today. But he did say, he was impressed with what we were doing.

I also stopped a neighbor on the street to see if she knew anyone needing furniture. She said she was amazed at what the church was doing. We don't do what we do to get recognition, but people are watching. Our actions were biblical, and people's response noticed. Look at Acts 2:47, "enjoying the favor of all the people". Because the church in Acts did what they said they believed, people noticed.

People are not perfect. The church isn't perfect. Anytime you get a group of people together, good things and not so good things happen. But, we are the body of Christ. We were created in the image of the Creator of the Universe. We were created to need each other.

We have been looking at a series on the small group aspect of church life.

So Far. . . .

1. The covenant connection.
2. The New Covenant is found in Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus lived in a large-group, small-group rhythm.
4. How did the early church do church?
 - Not so much about the 'method' but elements.
 - Application is cultural.
5. They. . .
 1. were devoted
 - b. devoted to:
 2. the Apostles teaching
 3. fellowship
 4. breaking of bread
 5. Prayer

The final two pieces of our journey focus on mutual care and worship.

I. Mutual Care

We have seen the church at work in the realm of mutual care. Jesus, in his inner circle, small group cared for them and they cared for each other. Jesus went to Peter's house to heal his mother-in-law. We need each other. Biblically we are to serve and care for each other.

Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

Could you sell something to provide for the needs of others? What about all that stuff in your basement? New trend in churches: Ebay. People give their stuff to the church, the church sells it on Ebay, and provide for others. There was a man one time who wanted to give to the church but didn't have the money. He sold a car he rarely used and gave the church the whole amount.

Galatians 5:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, **serve one another in love.** ¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

As a church we practice mutual care in the large group/small group rhythm. Big issues take more people. Smaller issues handled in the small group.

It's a simple concept.

II. Worship

God created us to love us and now he wants us to love him. This is called worship.

"Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' "This is *the* first and great commandment." Matt 22:37-38 (NKJV)

The very first commandment is to learn to love God with all you are!! There are many definitions of worship. It's not this ((hands up, mouth open)). This is a form of worship, but not worship exclusively! Worship isn't defined by a single act during church or in quiet.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God this is your spiritual act of worship." Romans 12:1

WORSHIP is MY RESPONSE to God's love.

How I respond to God's love. God always moves first. He loved us first!! He saves, He Blesses, He protects! Then because of these – we worship. We "OFFER"

WORSHIP is GIVING BACK to God.

God loves me and I give love back. When we are grateful we give back.

How do we give back?

'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This *is* the first commandment." Mark 12:30

A. WORSHIP IS FOCUSING MY ATTENTION ON GOD.

Not just going through the motions, but really, really thinking about God. Ever zone-out in church. It takes work to give attention to the things of God. Why should I focus on God? Because God is focused on you.

“O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.² You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off.³ You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways.” Psalms 139:1-3

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Romans 12:2

B. WORSHIP IS EXPRESSING MY AFFECTION TO GOD.

“We love Him because He first loved us.” 1 John 4:19
We have trouble with this. To show affection is to risk hurt!

C. WORSHIP IS USING MY ABILITIES FOR GOD.

“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,” Col 3:23.

Whatever we do for the Lord can then be an act of worship because we do it out of love. Whatever your job, occupation, service in church, missions, do it unto the Lord. That will honor God and show others Him.

Romans 12:9-16

APPENDIX 6

t-TEST SURVEY RESULTS

Table A1. Survey Section 1

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	85.96	88.64
Variance	52.81469388	52.43918367
Observations	50	50
Pearson Correlation	0.718686711	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
	49	
t Stat	-3.482587919	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000527433	
t Critical one-tail	1.676550893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.001054865	
t Critical two-tail	2.009575199	

Table A2. Survey Section 2

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	39.74	42.08
Variance	153.624898	130.4016327
Observations	50	50
Pearson Correlation	0.84379877	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	49	
t Stat	-2.461991825	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00869114	
t Critical one-tail	1.676550893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.01738228	
t Critical two-tail	2.009575199	

Table A3. Survey Section 3

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	22.12	22.88
Variance	10.06693878	9.291428571
Observations	50	50
Pearson Correlation	0.782275946	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	49	
t Stat	-2.613879819	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.005929196	
t Critical one-tail	1.676550893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.011858392	
t Critical two-tail	2.009575199	

Table A4. All Sections

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	147.82	153.6
Variance	288.2322449	240.0816327
Observations	50	50
Pearson Correlation	0.846900932	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	49	
t Stat	-4.493015778	
P(T<=t) one-tail	2.14551E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.676550893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	4.29101E-05	
t Critical two-tail	2.009575199	

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING BIBLICAL COMMUNITY THROUGH SMALL GROUPS MINISTRY AT BEAVERCREEK BAPTIST CHURCH, BEAVERCREEK, OHIO

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015
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This project examines the relationship between an individual's biblical understanding of community in small groups and their practice of biblical community in small groups. Chapter 1 defines the historical, contextual, and practical issues of community facing Beaver Creek Baptist Church. Chapter 2 presents an exegesis of Old and New Testament passages that show the role of covenant relationship and the formation of biblical community in small groups. Chapter 3 reviews the history of community formation and the contemporary application of. Chapters 4 and 5 provide the results, analysis, and conclusions of this project.

During this 16-week project participants studied biblical foundation and application of community in small groups. The goal was to experience an increase in understanding of community in small groups, measured by a survey before and after the treatment phase, and this increase in understanding was to produce an increase in participation in small groups.

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