

## INTRODUCTION

Over the next three weeks, I will be sharing from the book of Ezra about the importance of being plugged in to the best God has for you this year. Today I want to talk about the importance of being plugged in to a Sunday morning Bible study group.

Someone told me recently the first year they attended Green Acres, they slipped in late and sat up in the back of the balcony. Then they left early so they wouldn’t have to meet anyone. Since then, they’ve joined the church and gotten involved in a SMBS group, and they told me how blessed they are now.

If that’s where you are right now, that’s okay. Maybe you need to come and just check us out. I’m glad we can provide a place where you can be anonymous. But God loves you, and He wants to show you His love through His children—that will happen best when you’re plugged in to a small group Bible Study that meets on Sunday mornings. We have groups that meet at 8:15 and 9:30. Beginning in March, we will also offer Bible Study classes for all ages at 11:00. You’ll be blessed if you are a part of a SMBS group. But don’t take my word for it, listen to a couple of people tell you about the blessing of getting plugged in.

Many of you grew up thinking Sunday School was only for kids—and you still think that. But it’s for teenagers and adults too. That’s one reason why beginning this year we have “officially” changed the name from Sunday School to Sunday Morning Bible Study. I have to chuckle when I say “official” because we never get too “official” around here. We don’t have an “official” dress code. Some people call this room the “Worship Center,” others call it a “sanctuary.” Take your pick. I usually call it “the room where we gather to worship.” Once Dr. Bill Streckert jokingly told me he calls it an “auditorium” because in Latin *audio* means “to listen” and *taurus* means “bull.” Think about it.

So if you call SMBS “Sunday School,” we aren’t going to ask one of the policemen to escort you off the campus. What you call something is not nearly important as what you do about it. You may call it an “itch” or you may call it an “dermatological irritation” but you still have to scratch it! It doesn’t matter what you call, it as long you get plugged in to a group of people studying the Bible on Sunday mornings.

The book of Ezra is the story of the Jews when returned to Jerusalem after almost a century of being exiles in Babylon (modern day Iraq). When they returned, all they found were ruins. There was no temple, so the people felt spiritually unplugged. It’s a story of how they got plugged in. Let’s read beginning in 3:1:

“When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people **ASSEMBLED AS ONE MAN** in Jerusalem. The Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, **IN ACCORDANCE TO WHAT IS WRITTEN** in the law of Moses the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. Then in **ACCORDANCE WITH WHAT IS**

WRITTEN they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day.”

As we think about getting plugged in to God’s best, I want to share with you four important benefits of SMBS.

### **1. S.M.B.S. IS THE BEST PLACE TO PLUG IN FOR: STUDY (3:1-4; 7:10)**

The scripture says the people made a commitment to live according to God’s Word. Ezra has often been called the first Sunday School teacher in the Bible because we read in Ezra 7:10, “Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws.” For us, SMBS is a place where we can **learn to live according to God’s Word.**

The first thing the Jews did was to lay the foundation of the altar. Every good builder will tell you if a building has a weak foundation, it will settle, and the walls will crack. In Matthew 7, Jesus said your life must be built upon the foundation of hearing and obeying His Word. He said if a person doesn’t live a life according to God’s Word, he is like a house built upon sand. When the storms of life come, that life will crumble and crack. The only way to survive life’s hurricanes is build your life upon the solid foundation of God’s Word.

Even among Christians, there is an alarming level of Biblical ignorance. What percentage of adults claiming to be Christians do you think can quote all of the Ten Commandments? (less than 5 percent) I think the percentage in our church is higher because some of us learned the “song” a few years ago. When asked the question, “Who came first Moses or Abraham?” The most common answer given by adult believers was, “I don’t know.” (Abraham)

I heard about two lawyers who met at church and they were both surprised to see the other guy there. They started talking about the Bible and one of them said, “If you’re so religious, let me hear you recite the Lord’s Prayer. I’ll bet you \$50 you can’t say it.” The other guy said, “Are you kidding? That’s easy. The Lord’s prayer says, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.’” When he finished, the first one reached for his wallet saying, “I didn’t think you knew it!”

You may be thinking, “I agree, Pastor. When I come to worship, I’m getting Bible teaching from you, isn’t that enough?” Not really. Because of the variety of ages and backgrounds in a worship service, I try to teach on a level so a 10- or 12-year-old can understand what I’m saying. In other words, I serve spiritual milk—or I try to insert humor and practical advice so I hope it’s more like a milkshake. But in a SMBS you can savor the delicious meat of the Word. We have gifted teachers who study diligently to give you the historical backgrounds and practical truth of the Bible. If you have a question about something I say, you really can’t stop me and ask a question. When you get involved in a SMBS, you’ll discover many of the teachers encourage questions and discussion. Another advantage of SMBS is we are divided up into groups according to general age categories. First graders study the Bible in an age appropriate way, and so do adults.

As you stand at the beginning of new year, it’s a great time for you to say, “I’m going to commit myself to *learn* more about the Bible this year.” Now you don’t have to have any previous Bible knowledge to be a part of a SMBS. You aren’t going to be asked to name the twelve apostles or find the book of Nahum or anything. In fact, when you check it out, you don’t have to say anything, you can just learn. I guarantee there will be much more stability and strength in your life if you build on the foundation of living according to what is written in the Bible. But SMBS is about more than just studying the Bible. It is also the best place to:

## **2. BEST PLACE TO PLUG IN FOR: OUTREACH (7:28)**

SMBS is not just for *teaching*, it’s also for *reaching out* to others to join you. Ezra 7:28 says Ezra “gathered other men to go with him.” Your small group provides the best place for you to **bring others to find new relationships**.

The main reason new people come into our church is not the preaching, the music, or the building. People do come for those and other reasons, but the #1 reason they attend our church is because they have been personally invited by a friend or relative.

Studies have shown people who don’t regularly attend church are reluctant to come to a worship service alone. But the same studies reveal over 90 percent of Americans say they want to learn more about the Bible. The best way to reach people for Christ is through relationships. And the best place for relationships is in a SMBS.

So if you have a friend, classmate, or a work associate who doesn’t attend church, you could say to them, “I go to Green Acres, you ought to attend sometime.” Good for you! I’m glad you invited them, but according to church growth experts, less than 10 percent of those people will show up on their own in an unfamiliar church. Try this approach, “I go to Green Acres and there’s a small group of guys about our age who meet together in a casual atmosphere to study and discuss the Bible. We aren’t scholars, we’re all students—and it’s a real friendly group. If you’re interested I could stop by and pick you up this Sunday.” If you invite them at least three times, there is a 50/50 chance that they’ll say, “Okay.”

One of the best Sunday School verses is found in the book of Deuteronomy. It says, “Gather the people—men, women, children, and the stranger living in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord our God and follow carefully all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 31:12) Bible study is for everyone including those who are “strangers” to the family of God. For instance, Bob Bennett teaches a class for Young Married Couples called The Harvest Class. They already have about 50 people who attend every week, but they want to include new people. Every semester they have several teams in our FAITH evangelism training. They go out and invite enlist new people to be a part of their class. SMBS is *not* just for teaching—it’s for reaching new people as well. Who do you know that you could bring to be a part of your SMBS this year.

## **3. SMBS IS THE BEST PLACE TO PLUG IN FOR: COMMUNITY (10:1)**

When Ezra realized sin was responsible for the mess they were in, it broke his heart and he began to cry—but he didn’t cry alone. Ezra 10:1 says, “While Ezra was praying and confessing,

weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women, and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.” Nobody likes to cry alone, and Ezra didn’t have to; he had a support group who cried with him.

SMBS is a place where you can **share your burdens and pray for one another**. In Acts 2:44, we learn the earliest disciples shared “everything in common.” The Bible word is *koinonia* which means “to share in common.” You can see the word “common” or “communion” in “community.” Another synonym for community is “fellowship” but most Baptists visualize cookies and Kool-Aid with that word. Green Acres is so large we can’t really create an atmosphere of “fellowship” in the worship services; you hardly ever see the people who gather for the other morning service. Community is created in the smaller Bible Study groups.

How many of you grew up in smaller churches where you had “dinner on the grounds?” That’s where everyone brought food and laid it on a table and folks filed by and loaded down their paper plates. I loved it! The secret was to get three or four paper plates stacked together, because a single paper plate would collapse at the second dollop of ‘tater salad. One of the greatest inventions of mankind was the reinforced paper plate with three sections. It ranks right up there with the invention of the wheel—and Caller ID, according to my wife Cindy.

When I was a pastor of smaller churches, we’d have potluck dinners, that’s the same as dinner on the grounds, but you had it in the fellowship hall in the basement. I recall the sweet widows watched me like a hawk as I moved through the dishes. They couldn’t see to drive at night, but they had flawless vision when it came to watching the food I loaded on my plate. I didn’t want to disappoint any of them, so my plate consisted of tiny samples of food from every single dish! The men laughed at me and said something like, “Preacher, looks like you need sideboards for that plate.” I loved those guys—you know the kinds with the big bellies and the short ties. They’d laugh and say, “If you keep eatin’ like that you’re gonna’ get that ‘furniture disease.’ You know, furniture disease, where your chest is down in your drawers!”

You may be saying, “Yeah, pastor, I miss that. I don’t like a big church where there are too many of us to have dinner on the grounds.” Well, you wouldn’t have liked the church in the book of Acts because the Bible says they met together by the thousands in the temple courts, but then they also met in homes where they would “eat together with glad and sincere hearts.” (Acts 2:46) The large group meeting in the temple would be like this worship service. It’s great, but there’s not much fellowship. Our SMBS groups are like the disciples meeting in homes to fellowship together: you need both.

*Koinonia* means more than sharing a meal, although that’s a part of it. The primary meaning of the word is “share each other’s burdens.” The Bible says we should “Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

In the SMBS groups, the members pray for each and help them deal with the heavy burdens life loads onto us. Most groups have a prayer list every Sunday, they share burdens and prayer requests. By the way, those of you in our SMBS groups need to be careful you don’t spend too much time sharing verbal prayer requests. If your class has over 20 in attendance, it’s better to let members write down prayer needs and turn them in instead of sharing them verbally one at a

time. Sometimes groups can spend 15 minutes sharing requests and 2 minutes praying. It would be better to spend 2 minutes sharing request and 15 minutes praying for one another. Many classes distribute a printed prayer list each week, that’s a great idea. It’s frustrating when someone invites a guest for Bible Study and the teacher doesn’t have time to really teach the Word, because someone shares for ten minutes about their great aunt’s ingrown toenail!

Most SMBS groups also have a telephone prayer chain. If something happens to a member: an unexpected illness, or a death in the family, these members get on the phone and they start the prayer chain. If all you ever do is come to the big worship service, we may never know how we can pray for you and share your burdens.

People are lonely today. They are looking for a place where they can be loved. I heard a funny story about a lonely frog who really believed he was a handsome prince waiting to be discovered by a beautiful girl. The frog was so lonely he called the Psychic Hotline to ask about his future love life. His personal psychic advisor told him, “You’re going to meet a beautiful girl soon and she is going to want to know everything about you—inside and out.” The frog was thrilled. He asked, “Where will I meet her, at a party?” The Advisor replied, “No, in biology lab.”

SMBS is a place where you can meet some safe friends. You’ll find people who are really interested in you. It’s a place where single adults should be able to build relationships without the fear of someone hitting on them. SMBS is a place where widows should be able to come and meet women who understand their unique pain. It’s a place where empty nesters who devoted all their time and energy to raising their children can find friends going through the same stage of life. It’s a place where new residents can come to find a support group to replace the friends they left in another city.

Randy Roberts teaches a SMBS group that has grown from about 25 to 90 in attendance over the past few years. It’s because the class has a sense of community and friendship. Many new people who have moved into East Texas have joined Randy’s class because they are so friendly. Every month they have special events for the members to eat together and share their lives. That can only happen in a SMBS.

#### **4. S.M.B.S. IS THE BEST PLACE TO PLUG IN FOR: MINISTRY (10:16)**

Once the rebuilding was underway, the biggest problem Ezra faced was dealing with the multitude of problems facing the people. So, he wisely organized them into smaller groups. In Ezra 10:16, we read, “Ezra selected men who were family heads, one from each family division, and all of them designated by name.” That’s exactly what SMBS is—it is simply our large congregation divided into divisions and then into smaller units. There is an important people-principle that applies to business, education, sports...and even a church: **large groups operate effectively only when organized into smaller units.**

That’s a biblical principle. In Exodus 18, Moses was facing burnout because he was the only one trying to minister to the multitude. It says people crowded around him from sunrise to sunset. His father-in-law, Jethro, came to him and said, “What are you doing TO the people?” Moses said, “The people come to me with their needs, and I have to help them.” Jethro said, “This is NOT

GOOD. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.” He suggested Moses divide the mob into groups of hundreds, fifties, and tens, and appoint good men to work with each group. Then let Moses teach the Law of God to the people, but let those men minister to the smaller groups. Jethro was the first Sunday School superintendent in the Bible. Jethro concluded his advice by predicting, “If you do this, you’ll be able to handle the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.” (Exodus 18:23)

When I was 24, I served as pastor of a little church in central Alabama with about 300 members. I loved it because I knew the names of every member and I could pretty much minister to everyone myself. I personally visited in the home of every member, and I was there for every surgery they faced. Then I served a church with 800 members, and I tried to minister to every need there as well. It was a lot harder because there were more people.

In 1984, I went to First Baptist Church Gardendale, Alabama which had almost 3,000 members. I tried to minister to every member. For the first few months, I nearly killed myself. The chairman of the deacons, who is still like a father to me, came to my office one day. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, “David, you can’t be there for everyone who has a need. That’s what almost killed Brother Marler. We want you to preach God’s Word to us. We’ll let each Sunday School class take care of their members.” Brother Marler was the wonderful pastor who served before me. He’d suffered a heart attack followed with by-pass surgery, and never fully regained his strength. The deacon’s name was not Jethro, it was Walter, but I think he saved my life. That was the first time I understood the importance of every Sunday School class being a ministry unit within the larger church.

And that’s the beauty of our church. If you’re afraid of joining a big church, please understand that you’ll be a part of a smaller group of people who will know your name and will love you and minister to you. Some of the greatest small churches in America are our SMBS groups!

For instance, the Friendship Class, taught by John Childs, takes great care of their members. Although they have about 120 people attend each week, they are divided up into Care Groups of about 20 people. Each care group has a Care Group leader who regularly contacts the members of their group to find out if they have any special needs. That’s the *only* effective way the Body of Christ can minister to all the members.

## CONCLUSION

In 1966 the Beatles recorded a song entitled, “Eleanor Rigby.” (They never performed it in concert). Paul McCartney says that based the song on a lonely woman who used to live in their neighborhood. The haunting lyrics are,

Ah, look at all the lonely people.  
Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in a church where a wedding has been  
Lives in a dream.  
Waits at the window, wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door.  
Who is it for?

All the lonely people, where do they all come from?  
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?”

The song ends,

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name.  
Nobody came.  
Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walked from the grave.  
No one was saved.

There are lonely people out there. We need to reach out to them and lovingly invite them to join us on Sunday mornings as we study God’s Word. We need to befriend them so we can help them bear the burdens of life—and so they can minister to us.

If you had tickets to the Super Bowl would you show up to only watch the second half? If you were attending a play would you wait until intermission to arrive? No? Well for those of you who only attend worship and aren’t yet plugged in to a SMBS fellowship, that’s exactly what you’re doing. You are missing out the very best God has for you!

Life is too tough to face alone—we need each other. I heard a pastor tell about how his son was born without a left hand. The little boy grew up happy and active and didn’t let his handicap slow him down. Once in Sunday School the teacher was trying to teach the kids about the church. To illustrate it, she folded her hands and recited the little rhyme, “Here is the church; and here is the steeple; open it up and see all the people.”

Forgetting about the pastor’s son, she asked the class members to do it along with her. In the next second, she realized to her horror the pastor’s son would be unable to participate. Before she could correct herself, however, the pastor’s son turned to his buddy sitting next to him and said, “let’s do it together.” The two boys proceeded to join their hands together to make the church and the steeple. That’s why this year would be a great time for you to plug in to a SMBS group!

## OUTLINE

### SMBS\* IS THE BEST PLACE TO PLUG IN FOR:

#### 1. STUDY (3:1-4; 7:10)

Learn to live according to God’s Word.

#### 2. OUTREACH (7:28)

Bring others to find new relationships.

#### 3. COMMUNITY (10:1)

Share your burdens and pray for one another.

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. *Galatians 6:2*”

#### 4. MINISTRY (10:16)

Large groups operate effectively only when organized into smaller units.

\* Sunday Morning Bible Study



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes