

INTRODUCTION

We're in a series called "The DNA of Discipleship: I'm not fan of Jesus—I'm a follower." We have declared that 2013 is the Year of Discipleship and our key focus is when Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) We're examining the five genetic traits of a disciple. There's the gathering gene: a disciple shows up consistently. There's the gifted gene: a disciple serves up sacrificially. There's the growing gene: a disciple grows up spiritually. Today we're going to talk about the group gene: a disciple links up relationally. In the final message we'll talk about the generosity gene: a disciple offers up faithfully.

Tonight in New Orleans there's a football game on between the 49ers and the Ravens. The cover of this week's *Sports Illustrated* asked the question, "Does God care who wins the Super Bowl?" There are Christians on both teams. Ravens linebacker, Ray Lewis, will be wearing a black t-shirt with Psalm 91 printed on it, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick has Psalms 27:3 tattooed on his left bicep. "Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident." When he scores he's not kissing his bicep, he's kissing that verse.

Football is a team sport. Coaches love to say, "There's no 'I' in the world TEAM." You could take the best player in the history of the NFL and put him out there alone and he wouldn't stand a chance against a team. For instance, I think Adrian Petersen is the best running back in the NFL. Can you imagine if he was playing alone against a team? "Here's the kick-off, and Adrian Petersen takes it at his own goal-line. He starts out. He's at the ten, he's at the fifteen and, oh! He is leveled at the 12-yard line. First and ten. Adrian Petersen takes his own snap and, oh! He is tackled for a four yard loss. What do you think the final score would be? Adrian Petersen is good, but he couldn't even beat a local high school team by himself. He needs a team.

And Christians need a team, too. One of the best books I've read on discipleship is *The Invested Life* by Joel Rosenberg. He writes: "Christianity is not a solo sport. It's about building strong, healthy teams of fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ whom God can use to change the world. It's about older believers taking younger believers under their wings to love them, help them grow in Christ, and help them reproduce their faith in the lives of other younger believers. Making disciples of all nations can only be done one person at a time." (*The Invested Life*)

Followers of Jesus possess the group gene. God never intended you to live the Christian life alone. God loves groups. He created all the animals to be in groups. We have a lot of strange names for groups of animals. We call a group of sheep a flock and a group of cattle is called a herd. It's school of fish and a pack of wolves. A group of lions is called a pride and a group of bees is called a swarm. Those are probably familiar, but there are some other group names for animals that you might not be familiar with. A group of rabbits is called a warren. A group of quail is called a covey. A group of mice is called a mischief. A group of whales is called a pod. A group of vultures is called a venue. A group of raccoons is called a gaze. A group of porcupines is called a prickle. A group of penguins is called a rookery. A group of lizards is called a lounge. A group of bats is called a colony. A group of stingrays is called a fever. But my

three favorites are these: A group of giraffes is called a tower. A group of rhinoceroses is called a crash. And a group of hippopotamuses is called a bloat. So do you know what you call a group of disciples? A church. God saved you to put you in a group. There's no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian—even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. God's plan for your life is that you will link up with a group of believers.

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost almost 2,000 years ago. Peter preached the gospel and there were 3,000 people added to the church that first day. As the church exploded with growth, we learn how the early Christians functioned.

Acts 2:42-47. "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."

In this message we're going to focus on the importance of small groups in the church. As you read this passage it becomes clear that the early disciples had two different venues for gathering together. Thousands of them gathered together in the Temple Courts and then they divided up into small groups in the homes. Let's borrow a term from our Children's Ministry and call those two experiences big church and little church.

The church in Jerusalem continued to grow. In Acts 4:4 we read that the number of men in the church was at 5,000. That doesn't include women and children. So how in the world could a huge church of thousands of people function? The same way we do. Again in Acts 5:42, we read about big church and little church. "Day after day in the temple courts (big church) and from house to house (little church), they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." (Acts 5:42)

If you want to be a healthy, growing disciple of Jesus, you need two different group experiences in your life. You need both big church and little church.

I. BELIEVERS PARTICIPATE IN "BIG CHURCH" WORSHIP

The Bible says the disciples met together in the Temple Courts. Herod the Great renovated the second temple. The temple sat on the top of Mount Moriah, the same place Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed. But not many people can stand on the top of a hill, so Herod spend forty years hauling in millions of cubic tons of dirt and rubble to build a flat area around the Temple. The Temple building was relatively small, only about thirty feet by sixty feet. But Josephus tells us that the size of the temple courts was six stadia. That's the word that gives us our English word "stadium." A stadia was six hundred square feet, so that means you could fit twelve football fields on the temple mount. That was the only place in Jerusalem where several thousand people could gather.

Can't you picture these new believers gathering around singing the Psalms and then hearing Peter or John talk about the things Jesus had done and said? In the same way, we gather together in big church to worship the name of God and proclaim the Word of God.

The Bible directs us to gather together and worship God. Psalm 34:3 says, "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together."

As I prepared for this message, I remembered how my family went to church every Sunday when I was a kid. I recalled something that now seems so important to me, but at the time I missed its significance. Every Saturday night, my dad had a ritual. He called my brother and me to bring him our Sunday shoes—and then he'd shine them. He had a little shoe shine kit with a place to put your shoe so the heel wouldn't slip. We'd put our shoes on that wooden stand while he applied the polish. Then he'd take a rag and buff them to a high shine. My brother and I each wore one of my dad's shoes while he shined them as well.

Looking back on that, I discover a very important family lesson. My dad started preparing to take his family to church on Saturday night. We never woke up on Sunday morning and wondered if we were going because of the weather or we overslept. The decision was made on Saturday night with the shining of the shoes. Dads and moms: What a great lesson to teach your kids. Start preparing them to go to church on Saturday night and it will be a lesson they will take with them through life. Showing up for worship is an important habit for a disciple. But there's more.

II. DISCIPLES ENGAGE IN "LITTLE CHURCH" FELLOWSHIP

The church in Acts would have never grown if they had only had the big church experience on the Temple Mount. They grew through the house-to-house meetings: Little church.

Most people come to Green Acres and think it's a huge church, but we are tiny compared to the largest congregations in the world. The 25 largest Christian churches in the world aren't even in the USA. Most of them are in Asia. The largest Christian congregation in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea. They have 800,000 members. How can a church of that size even exist? Small groups. They have a worship center that seats 26,000 and they have twelve weekend worship services. They have satellite congregations around Seoul. But the key to the growth and health of that church is the fact that they have 20,000 home cell groups that meet every week. They have big church and they have little church.

Are you a part of a small group Bible Study? Every week at Green Acres we have about 1,000 people who come to big church, but they don't attend a Sunday Morning Bible Study Group. I call them the WAOs. That stands for Worship Attendance Only. Are you one of the WAOs? If you aren't yet a part of a small group, my challenge for you is to stop being just a WAO. I want to say, "Whoa to the WAOs. And Woe to the WAOs!" You are missing out on the best thing God has for you and your family in our church. If you aren't yet a part of a SMBS, go to this website: www.sbmsfinder.org. It will direct you to a choice of several small groups just right for you and your family.

Let me give you five reasons why you need little church, a small group.

A. Relationships: Know people by name

Studies have shown that even if you're an active member of a church, you're going to know a maximum of about 60 people. If the church has 60 members you will probably know everyone. But it's also true if the church has 600, 6,000 or 60,000 members. You're only going to know about 60 people.

If you only come to big church chances are you aren't going to build many relationships. If you sit in the same spot every Sunday, you might spend a few minutes before the service chatting with people around you, but you don't have a chance to really get to know them.

God knows the name of every person gathered to worship her today, but none of us know everyone's name. But if you are part of a Sunday Morning Bible Study group, someone will know your name. Knowing someone's name is important for fellowship. When John finished his third letter he gave these instructions, "The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name." (3 John 14)

But if you start attending a SMBS, there will be people who will get to know you and will greet you by name. Someone said fellowship is "two fellows in the same ship." That ship is "relationship." The Greek word for fellowship is "*koinonia*." It means, "sharing together." For some of you the nearest and dearest friends you have in this world are the ones in your Sunday Morning Bible Study Group.

East Texas is full of lonely people. Someone said a city is just a place where people are lonely together. You may be electronically connected and relationally disconnected. You can follow people on Twitter and have thousands of friends on your Facebook page, but still be all alone. You can email and text and have every social networking app going for you and still be disconnected from human interaction.

Websites like eHarmony and Christian Mingle have sprung up because people are longing for real relationships. There's even a new dating site for people over 50 called ourtime.com. Church is a great place to meet your mate. My parents met in church, and I met my wife in church. How many of you met your mate in church?

Everybody's lonely. I heard a joke about a frog who really thought he was a prince on the inside. He was looking for his princess to kiss him and release his inner prince. He got so desperate that he called the Psychic hotline. The medium said, "Yes, I see a beautiful young woman in your future. She will be very interested in you and will know you inside and out." The frog said, "Great! Where will I meet her?" The Psychic said, "In biology lab."

B. Interaction: Study the Bible

When you come to big church, you hear the Word taught. Because of the variety of ages and backgrounds in big church, 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. 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.

The Bible speaks of the importance of diligent Bible Study. We read, "The Bereans were of more noble character...for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11)

A few years ago Researcher George Barna polled Americans on their knowledge of the Bible. His findings reveal there is a lot of biblical illiteracy in our nation. According to his research, sixty percent of Americans can't name five of the Ten Commandments and less than 5% can name all of the Ten Commandments. 82% of Americans think "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible. 12% of Americans think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

Two men were bragging about which one of them knew more about the Bible. One of them said, "If you're so religious, let me hear you recite the Lord's Prayer. I'll bet you \$10 you can't say it." The other guy said, "Are you kidding? The Lord's Prayer is, 'Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.'" When he finished the first guy reached for his wallet and said, "Here's the money, I didn't think you knew it!"

C. Fellowship: Share food and fun together

When the believers worshipped on the Temple Mount there was no way they could share a meal together. So they did that in the homes. The Bible says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." (Acts 2:46-47)

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 – the secret was to get three paper plates together so it wouldn't collapse under all the food. When I was a pastor of my first church out of seminary we only had about 100 people in attendance. Those folks could really cook and they loved to eat. It seemed like every other week we'd have a potluck dinner. I recall the sweet widows watched me like a hawk as I moved through the dishes. They were looking to see if I sampled their food. 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 kind 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!"

There are so many folks who come to big church that we could never have a fellowship meal at the same time. Can you imagine how long the line would be? But our individual SMBS groups

share food and fellowship together all the time. There's something spiritual about sharing a meal together. Jesus chose a meal with His disciples to institute a new covenant. It was a meal with the disciples on the road to Emmaus that they recognized Jesus. And after the resurrection Jesus met the disciples on the banks of the Sea of Galilee for a meal.

D. Care: Receive support in times of crisis

All of us go through times of personal crisis. There are deaths in our families. There are times when we get sick or we have family members in the hospital. People get divorced or lose their jobs. When you go through a crisis you need your church family to be there to help you.

Even the Apostle Paul went through tough times. He had been stoned almost to death in Derbe, and when he arrived at Galatia, he was a mess. But the Believers there showed him the love of God in his time of injury and weakness. He later wrote, "It was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself." (Galatians 4:13-14)

Everyone has needs, but if you aren't involved in a small group Bible study, there's a chance our congregation won't even know about your need unless you tell one of us. How do we know when people are in the hospital, have a death in their family, or have a new baby? Ninety percent of the time we learn about it from their SMBS class. Once again, like the church in Acts 2, there are too many people in our entire church family for us to know about every need. But if you are in a small group where people know you and know about your needs, they can minister to you and show you the love of Jesus.

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. I need you and you need me, that's why every Christian should be a part of a SMBS group.

E. Ministry: Minister to others in their time of need

When you go through a crisis you need to receive love and concern from the members of your little church. But you can turn it around. When you are in a SMBS group, you have a way to show the love of Jesus to people in your class who have needs. The Bible says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

In Exodus 18, Moses had a problem. He was leading thousands of people toward the Promised Land, but they had so many disputes and crises that he spent every day from morning until evening trying to settle every dispute. His father-in-law, Jethro, came to him and said he was making himself and everyone else miserable. He counseled Moses to share the ministry. So Moses appointed men to divide the congregation into groups of thousands, hundreds, and fifties. And each man was given a group to deal with. Instead of Moses dealing with every crisis, these elders addressed the needs. That's a perfect picture of how a big church is organized for ministry by having many little churches.

And that's the beauty of Green Acres. If you're afraid of joining a big church, please know that the church gets a lot smaller when you link up with a smaller group of people who will know your name and minister to you in times of crisis. Some of the greatest small churches in America are our SMBS groups!

There's an old hymn we used to sing at the end of every Lord's Supper when I was growing up. We would only sing the first verse. John Fawcett wrote it. Maybe you recognize it: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." The third verse says, "We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows, the sympathizing tear." That kind of fellowship and caring can never happen in big church—that's why you need little church.

CONCLUSION

There's more to the Christian life than just believing. It's important for Christians to belong. The best way to build Christian relationships is to be a part of small group where someone will know your name and where you can enjoy fellowship and ministry. In 1957 Paul McCartney and John Lennon were introduced by a mutual friend at St. Peter's Church in Liverpool. In the cemetery of the church, there was a tombstone engraved with the name Eleanor Rigby, who died at age 44. Nine years later, Paul McCartney wrote "Eleanor Rigby," a song that has been called the anthem of lonely people.

Ah, look at all the lonely people / Ah, look at all the lonely people. / Eleanor Rigby, picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been. / Lives in a dream. / Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door. / Who is it for? / Father McKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear. / No one comes near. / Look at him working, darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there. / What does he care? / 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 walks from the grave. / No one was saved. / All the lonely people. / Where do they all come from? / All the lonely people. / Where do they all belong?"

I've got the answer. Lonely people belong in a small group of Christians who will befriend them and love them as a brother or sister in Christ. It's impossible to build strong relationships in big church—that only happens in little church.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes