



JESUS, OUR MODEL SMALL GROUP LEADER

Your pastor could preach the most profound sermons this side of Heaven. The worship service might bring all who attend into the presence of God weekly. Your Christian education program could give your members enough ammunition to win a Bible quiz against any congregation in the country, hands down.

Yet even if all these things were true, something could still be missing in your church. That element, woven throughout the fabric of the New Testament, is an integral part of life in Christ: relationships with other believers.

Close relationships among the members of God's family provide a context for applying biblical truth, promote unity and caring among the members, meet spiritual and emotional needs, furnish a setting for lifestyle evangelism, and in short, demonstrate the Body of Christ in action. Every church needs a ministry format that will intentionally promote these kinds of relationships.

I'm convinced that small groups provide the ideal format to accomplish these requirements.

Small groups are not just a sociological fad. Neither are they a clever gimmick to pump up church attendance, nor a panacea for all the ills that confront the church. Small groups are a ministry format with a solid biblical foundation.

While a rationale for small groups is found throughout the Bible, I'd like to focus on two lines of thought depicted in the New Testament: Jesus as a small group leader and what I'll call our New Testament mandate. Let's start with Jesus' example.

JESUS AS A SMALL GROUP LEADER

For me, Jesus' involvement in a small group is the most convincing argument for including such groups in the life of the local church. Jesus Christ is pictured in the New Testament as the greatest small group leader in history. As a group leader or participant you are walking in His footsteps. What can we learn from Jesus about the ministry of small groups?

Jesus began His earthly ministry by establishing His "small group," the apostles. When Jesus began His public ministry, one of His first acts was to form His small group ([Mt. 4:18-22](#), [Lk. 6:13](#)). The Son of God certainly didn't need the companionship or assistance of the apostles. Yet from the very beginning He elected to establish and minister within a framework of interpersonal relationships.

Jesus ministered in both large and small group contexts. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom to large crowds. Likewise, He met with small groups in homes ([Mt. 26:6](#)) and spent considerable time with His special group, the apostles. Both forms of ministry were important.

Jesus' ministry to large groups was preceded by and proceeded out of His small group context. Which came first, the chicken (large group) or the egg (small group)? In Jesus' case, small group emphasis preceded His large group involvement. Furthermore, it was the small group that provided the platform for Jesus' ministry to large groups of people. The apostles accompanied Jesus as He proclaimed the Good News to the multitudes. Yet He always withdrew to the familiarity and support of His select small group ([Mk. 3:7](#)).

Jesus spent the majority of His time with His small group. If we could add up the amount of time Jesus spent with the apostles, we would likely find that this group consumed the majority of His time. They were together constantly: They traveled together, shared meals, experienced mutual hardship, and literally lived together. As Jesus' crucifixion drew closer, He spent more and more time with His small group and less time with the multitudes that sought Him out.

Relationships, not organizations, were central in Jesus' method. The Kingdom Jesus sought to proclaim was not an earthly organization, but a heavenly realm ([Lk. 17:20-21](#)). Christ could easily have remained aloof from any relationships that entangled Him in human needs and suffering. Yet, as a practical demonstration of the gospel, He chose to spend His time with people—caring, healing, listening, forgiving, encouraging, teaching, and preaching. Because of His emphasis on people, not programs, the only "organization" that merited Jesus' continuing time and attention was His small group.

Jesus used the small group context to teach and model spiritual knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Having formed His group, Jesus taught and modeled spiritual truth by drawing them close to Himself. It was not a formal or academic experience; the small group members simply participated with Christ in whatever He did. They saw and experienced the attitudes and actions He was admonishing others to adopt. It was through this intimate association that the apostles were granted "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God" ([Lk. 8:10](#)). The apostles' small group was their living-learning laboratory.

The small group was Jesus' method for leadership training. Jesus devoted Himself primarily to the task of developing a select group of men, the apostles. His goal was to equip this small group of disciples to carry on the work of the gospel after He returned to the Father. Jesus selected common men, "unschooled, ordinary men" by worldly standards ([Acts 4:13](#)), who were ready to follow Him and were teachable. In turn, Jesus poured His life into these men and thrust the future of His whole ministry upon them. It would be "through their message" ([Jn. 17:20](#)) that the world would come to believe.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MANDATE

Much of the New Testament deals with the types of attitudes and actions God wants to characterize the members of His household, the community of believers. A quick review of some of the "one another" verses will give you a good idea of what I am talking about:

- Be devoted and give preference to one another ([Ro. 12:10](#))
- Accept one another ([Ro. 15:7](#))
- Care for one another ([1 Cor. 12:25](#))
- Carry each other's burdens ([Gal. 6:2](#))
- Forgive one another ([Eph. 4:32](#))
- Encourage, build up one another ([1 Thess. 5:11](#))
- Spur one another on to love and good deeds ([Heb. 10:24](#))
- Confess your sins to one another ([Jas. 5:16](#))
- Pray for one another ([Jas. 5:16](#))
- Serve one another ([1 Pet. 4:10](#))
- Love one another ([1 Jn. 4:11](#))

The list above provides only a brief taste of the standards that should govern the household of God. But what is the best setting to pursue these biblical attitudes and actions? Based on the biblical evidence, the most logical answer is small groups meeting in homes. This ideal context

stresses relationships in an informal setting, which in turn facilitates understanding and obeying the New Testament mandate. This was true for the early church ([Acts 2:42-47](#)) and it is still true for us today.

[Hebrews 10:24-25](#) provides us with further insight. Here we are instructed "not to give up meeting together." Our usual response to this verse is to assume we are being urged to attend "church," a Sunday morning worship service held in a church building. Certainly this application is legitimate, but it is not inherent in the author's intent. Specifically, we are told "to spur one another on toward love and good deeds" and to "encourage one another." This type of activity is possible in a large group service, but it is not likely to occur. On the other hand, the small group's relational dynamic provides the ideal setting.

Jesus said, "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" ([Mt. 18:20](#)). Hundreds of people aren't required. The vertical relationship the two or three Christians enjoy individually with Jesus is enhanced by the horizontal relationships among them. Thus, two Christians are the bare minimum needed to constitute a Christian community. "Church" is not limited to large meetings, but can also be a legitimate function of small groups.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

Our mandate is not limited to an internal focus, a secret society for believers only. Jesus opens membership in the household of God to everyone when He commands us to "make disciples of all nations" ([Mt. 28:19](#)). Here again, small groups can play a significant role. Paul understood this. His efforts in mass evangelism and instruction ([Acts 19:8-10](#)) were augmented by "house to house" (literally "in the various private homes") personal evangelism and teaching ([Acts 20:20](#)). The conversion of Cornelius and his whole household is a good example ([Acts 16:32-34](#)).

Evangelism and discipleship are greatly enhanced in the context of a small group. Groups provide a person-to-person setting rather than a program-to-person agenda. This more natural, interpersonal context readily lends itself to sharing the gospel. A 1988 study on religion in America by the Princeton Religion Research Center, under the direction of George Gallup, Jr., cites small groups as "the outreach tool of the '90s."

BECOMING LIKE JESUS

Jesus is our model. By striving to become more like Him we will grow in character. As we apply His principles for ministry our lives, too, will bear fruit. What kind of structure will provide us with the instruction, support, and challenge we need to become Christlike—as well as enable us to follow His pattern for personal ministry? When we closely examine the life and ministry of Jesus, it becomes clear that one key method is small groups.

We've only tapped the surface of the biblical rationale for small groups, but the biblical evidence is clear. **Small groups are a necessity—not an option—in the local church.** Can we afford not to experience the opportunities for growth they offer?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Neal McBride is a professor of psychology at [George Fox College](#), in Newburg, OR. An experienced pastor, church planter, and Air National Guard chaplain, he has worked with a variety of small groups for more than twenty years. This article is adapted from his book *How to Lead Small Groups* ([NavPress](#), 1990).