

On Church Small Group Meetings



matt violassi

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When I first dedicated my life to loving and serving God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, I was ushered into a number of churches that seemed to each be in a melt-down or church-split of some sort. Being new in this whole thing, this was very confusing, perplexing, and disheartening to me. I thought these groups would all have the full-gospel truth - and have it all-together. I learned there was somewhat of a Christian civil war going on between those that believed God was truly alive today and communicated to His children personally (and that He still performed miracles and such today) versus those that seemed to believe (basically) that He merely left us with the Bible to try to figure everything out and try to please Him the best we could.

These different churches had their own models of how they thought God liked the way church meetings/assemblies should be done. Religious wars have been started over this issue! (God likes **this**! No, God likes **that**! No, He wants it done **this** way! God likes it done **that** way! We really need to assess our convictions of what God likes and doesn't like, and what kind of services He likes and doesn't like!)

I had been profoundly touched and changed by God through dedicating my life to God, and truly believed He was alive and real. So, I began to ask God to show me ***how He liked our times of gathering and assembling to be done***. I was directed to this verse penned by the Apostle Paul:

"What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. " (1 Cor 14:26)

(At the time, it seemed like the common church model was attending 2 Sunday church services (morning and evening, some additionally including a Sunday School meeting) and a midweek evening service - usually on a Wednesday. The 3 main meetings basically consisted of a time of music & singing and then some preaching/teaching.)

The Apostle Paul was giving direction for an assembly of some type where there was room for individual sharing by the participants - of spiritual things - for the building-up, encouragement, and strengthening of the attendees. Church meetings that included this ingredient seemed just as uncommon when I started out, as it seems

today. I began a journey on finding a church that understood and practiced this type of thing. There had to be more. More than people just filing-in and filing-out of services each week - no one seeming to be really touching each other's' lives in meaningful ways. Lives not really being a part of each other's except by a common thread of a particular body of doctrine.

Then, for a whole summer, God had me study and restudy and re-listen to a large cassette tape series on Church Planting by John Wimber. John Wimber was popular and controversial at the time, bringing about at least several large contributions to the Body of Christ/The Church. He taught and exhorted the Church to be more like Jesus in our evangelism (coined "Power Evangelism"), utilizing not only the *preaching* of the gospel, but *demonstrating* the gospel with signs and wonders. This is what Jesus did. This is what was done in the early church. There are glimpses of this in church revivals throughout the ages. John Wimber traveled the United States and the world, teaching and demonstrating models on how to become more proficient at this. He also contributed to the Church a higher level of musical worship to God by exhorting and demonstrating the singing of songs **to God**, rather than merely singing songs **about God**, which was commonly done at the time. (Singing songs directly **to God** puts things on a whole different spiritual plane than merely singing songs about God.) John was also a professional musician a large part of his life. His band, "The Righteous Brothers" was a fairly successful secular band. The Vineyard Churches grew in number and eventually became a full-fledged denomination, with at least 2,000 churches, to my understanding.

John Wimber's **church growth model**, at least formally at one time, was for the creation, growth, and multiplication of small **cell groups** (small groups, life groups, home groups, friendship groups, etc.). **Healthy human cells**, the basic unit and strength of the human body - grow, divide, and replicate. So too, was to be the basic assembly group of the Vineyard churches - the church cell groups were to gather, grow, be healthy, divide, and replicate. This was the model for healthy church growth and multiplication. The Vineyard Churches were to be built on this. **Also, the small cell group meeting was supposed to be the most important meeting of the week for a member!**

The *large church-wide assembly* was to happen once-a-month to gather all the cell groups as a family to (primarily) worship God (and to be the "dessert". The small group meetings were considered the "meat & potatoes"). This is a very important conceptual change. The church culture in America was and currently adheres to the large Sunday service being one's top-priority meeting. John Wimber's call was something very

radically different. (Later, to my dismay, I found out that many, possibly most Vineyard pastors did not know about John's church-life & planting directive published on his church growth tapes!)

There was a lot of wisdom in this type of small group meeting (no more than about 12-14 people max, then divide).

- **Talk about accountability!** It's going to be hard to be involved in pornography or continuing being a sea-haggy to your husband during the week at home, if you are going to be face-to-face with others every week in an intimate Spirit-filled meeting like one of these!

- Here was a time to worship God in song - which usually brings His sweet and refreshing presence. (Making contact with God, and acknowledging God, first thing through primarily music worship!)

- Here is a time and place where people could be known and know others! We all have a God-given need *to be known* by others, and *to get to know others!*

- Here is a place where 1 Cor. 14:26 could take place - where you could share a new song or meaningful verse or testimony about what God had done, or a revelation, prophecy, etc. - ***all for the edification of all.*** (Here is a place where we can grapple about this tongue/prophecy verse/issue! - It is so easy for us to dismiss verses in the Bible that we don't understand or don't *want* to understand!)

- Here is a place where you probably would be asked by some people who care about you - how your *week* is going - how your *life* is going. How powerful! How often do people at church actually ask you how your week is going? *How your life is going?*

- Here is a place you might get prayer whether you asked for it or not. (I tried to always make sure people had the opportunity to be prayed-over every meeting by the group; a group of people praying over a person seems to be one of the most powerful things that can happen to a person. There seems to always be *great power in group prayer.*)

- Here is a place where a meeting could turn into group intercession for national and international events and for leaders. *This brings about change.* We can be history-makers and history-changers! (BTW - It is not right for *anyone* to bash *any leader* - if they haven't at least prayed for them, as we are commanded to - by God.)

- This is where future leaders of the church can be disciplined and raised-up and truly be "known" by the congregation - versus hiring some pastor or staff through resumes and interviews - and then finding out later who the person really is.
- A great time and place to periodically incorporate having the intimate, powerful, and holy sacrament of the *Communion Table* or the *Lord's Table*!
- This type of small group meeting can also be a time to go-over the Sunday meeting message. Many church leaders work very hard to bring to the congregation an anointed message and teachings from God. It is so easy for us to not really be listening. Going over the message again, and discussing it so people really "get it" can be very wise and helpful, instead of congregants just going to hear the next exciting message the following week.
- Oh, yes. John directed that there could be a time of teaching (in his small group meeting model) - *but only for about 10 minutes at the most*. This is because it is so easy for a teaching gift to dominate a gathering and dominate the whole meeting (which is commonly done) . . . and people are back to the filing-in and filing-out syndrome of a teaching meeting or "Bible Study" - with minimal heart-to-heart human interaction ever taking place!
- John also taught that the host couple/person should always try to provide some kinds of drinks and snacks at the end of the meeting. This is because, after all the spiritual stuff that took place in the meeting - "**many times more happens over the coffee and cookies!**" People tend to then be feeling more comfortable and relaxed after the meeting is formally ended, and are more apt to be truly honest and open about things, while chatting over the Coke and pretzels, or some pizza. This is a profound thing - ***Snack Time having the opportunity of being the most beneficial, live-changing time of a gathering!***

So, my wife Barbara and I got under the authority of some Vineyard pastors who seemed to be trying to do this kind of thing, and began having meetings like these. Friday nights seemed a very wise time - so that people could stay as late as they wanted. No need to rush home after an hour or two to hurriedly get the baby-sitter home because they had to get up early for school the next morning (mid-week meeting time problem). Plus, if we were going to try to incorporate these "avenues of grace" previously talked about - the meeting is going to take a couple of hours, possibly plus. Frequently we provided the pizza.

Everyone who attended my home group meetings got prayed for *every day, privately*; my wife Barbara and I carried the families in prayer throughout the week. The guys got at least one call from me a week - to see how everything was going, to get to know them better, to be a friend to them, to help them with their needs. My wife did the same. We tried to meet with them individually during the week, for coffee and such - if they seemed to want deeper friendship.

Most people, it seems, want to attend truly fun and satisfying parties - a place where everyone likes you and you like everyone . . . complete with music and eating and drinking and merriment. Why not God-parties? – the same but complete with God and His Kingdom coming forth in some good way. (I was the party chairman of my dorm in college.) This is a basic human need and desire and is quite evident in the world today. Should not the Church be hosting what true parties should look like?

As mentioned in a previous book/booklet, I soon began to realize, that unless Christians had some kind of healthy on-going daily relationship with God - these weekly cell group meetings were kind of dead. People had little to share. They were tired and burnt-out. Most were usually kind of bummed-out. Most seemed spiritually dull. They were not excited about God very much. They did not have any grid or understanding or faith to make this the most important meeting of the week. (For the record - I was in the same boat as everyone else. I was a common worker in a demanding job and lone supporter of a wife and 5 children with tons of bills and pressures.)

I saw they needed to make another type of meeting the most important meeting of the week . . . their personal, private God-times. So, my mission and vision to help the church seemed to change and evolve to this over the years . . . **being a voice in exhorting people to attend this meeting as top-priority.**

Nowadays, it seems most young married couples both work. Someone will need to pick up the slack of all the shopping, cooking, house-cleaning, laundry, taking kids to school and pick-up, sports teams (be careful! - a potential life-of-God stealer!), checking/re-teaching homework, paying bills, performing home maintenance and repairs, etc. This two-earner lifestyle can be dangerously busy!

(Many times I see couples now sacrificing "a day of rest" to actually finish all of this normal house work. **This is a recipe for disasters of all types.** I just don't believe God will bless and inhabit any kind of Christian family and lifestyle that does not honor a day of rest (the Bible says it was made *for us*). Ignoring having one day of rest per week, *of doing no work*, will harm us physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or

spiritually). ***We might have to make some serious lifestyle changes to accomplish this!***

Our personal relationship with God is the most important thing there is. He wants us to be dedicated to its cultivation and growth. I believe, after we have been a Christian for a while, the adamant scheduling of our personal, private God-times is the most important thing we can do in life, and the most important meeting we can attend . . . above all others.

I believe one of the best church small group meetings we can have is just inviting someone (or several people) over for dinner. We can cover all the "avenues of grace" that were touched-upon in this article, through this kind of love-initiated, informal meeting. We can do this anytime, anywhere. Although there are many types of church small group gatherings - many on the basis of a common interest (new moms, study a book, a motorcycle group, out-reach group, men's breakfast, Bible study group, discipleship group, soup kitchen group, prayer group, etc.) - **most everyone likes to eat!** Doing this kind of Church Small Group Meeting is easy with this universal common interest!

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