

SMALL GROUPS – WHY BOTHER

I know that being a Christian is about having a relationship with Jesus Christ and that we meet him through his word, the Bible. Well I read my Bible daily and even attend Church on Sundays, so why do I need to get involved in a small group?

It can sometimes seem to Christians as if the world revolves around 'small groups'. We go to Church and are encouraged to join a home group or a Bible study group or a cell group. We go to CU and are encouraged to run a 'Just Looking Group', join another Bible study group or cell group, be part of a prayer triplet, pray with other Christians on our courses, read one to one with other Christians... the list goes on.

Yet the Bible has very little to say about small groups as such, so why shouldn't I ignore the clamour of all these groups and just concentrate on my personal relationship with Jesus. After all surely that would then leave me with much more time to spend with non-Christians who urgently need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ?

Well this is true, but whenever I am tempted to think like this I remember a vivid illustration of the difficulty of being a Christian surrounded by non-Christians that I was given some years ago. On a weekend away (with my Bible study group!) the leader placed a chair in the middle of the room and called two people out of the group. One person was told to stand on the chair and pull the other person up onto it, whilst at the same time the person on the floor was being instructed to try to pull the person standing on the chair off it. Needless to say the person standing on the chair was pulled off it in double quick time.

The point being made was that as Christians in a secular world we are like the person on the chair. Alone, we are much more likely to be pulled away from Christ than we are to bring hoards of people to him. In Deuteronomy chapter 7 when God is giving Moses instructions on capturing the land of Canaan that he had promised the Israelites he commands him to completely destroy the Canaanites, to make no treaties with them and absolutely to avoid marrying them "*for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods...*" (Deut 7: 4). This is precisely the danger we are faced with today. As we live, work and study side by side with non-Christians we are at risk of being enticed away from the one true God to love and serve other worldly gods.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews has this danger in mind when he says "*see to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" (Hebrews 3:12) The remedy he prescribes is to "*...encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*" (Hebrews 3:13) Sin is the act of turning away from the living God; of having a higher priority than pleasing God (usually pleasing ourselves), and the world is full of opportunities and temptations to sin – some of them obvious, but many more of them subtle and attacking us invariably at our weakest spot.

None of us start out intending to sin, but being in the world is like wine to our senses. If we keep on drinking from it with out a break we start to get drunk; our senses are dulled, our perception is blurred and we can no longer discern with any consistency those things which are causing us to turn our backs on God and reject his standards.

Worldly wisdom tells us that to avoid getting drunk we should have at least one soft drink for every alcoholic one. Biblical wisdom tells us that to halt the assault of the world on our senses we should “...not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:25) In particular we are to encourage one another from Scripture, for “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3: 16).

This is where our small groups can be an invaluable source of help. They provide an opportunity to correct our thinking on various issues – or to start us thinking about them; they are a source of encouragement and support in our evangelism and in standing up against the attacks of the world; and as John Stott says in his book *Issues Facing Christians Today* “Small groups of Christians can be visible embodiments of the gospel.”

Our biggest challenge really is not to ask ‘should I be involved in a small group?’ but rather ‘which small group(s) should I be involved in?’ - and there, I’m afraid, there are no easy answers. However some useful questions to ask ourselves would be...

- What is the purpose of this specific small group? – Is it there to help me face specific challenges, to enable me to be a proper member of the church family, to help me reach out to colleagues or friends with the gospel, to help me grow as a Christian etc.
- Where do my particular worldly challenges come from? – friends, family, values in lectures, values at work, my own desires etc.
- How will the different small groups help me to be a Christian with integrity in the world?
- Am I receiving well-rounded support? – teaching, prayer support, encouragement with evangelism, accountability etc.
- How does each small group present me with the opportunity to serve, as well as being served?

With the best will in the world we cannot belong to every small group that we have the opportunity to join or might like to join, so we must learn to be wise in our priorities. If the biggest challenges to our faith come from the values that we have thrust at us in lectures then it makes sense to ensure that not only are we in a setting where we are growing as Christians in knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, but we are also in a setting where we are enabled to apply this knowledge to the specific worldly challenges bought up by our lectures. This might mean that we go along to a church Bible study group and a nurses/midwives prayer and discussion group. If the biggest challenges to our faith come from the questions or lifestyles of our friends at university then we might find it more helpful to go along to the CU and their Bible study groups and meet 1:1 for prayer & study with an older Christian nurse/midwife from our church.

The permutations are seemingly endless and will vary according to an individual's needs, abilities and time. Do not feel guilty if you cannot go along to as many small groups as your neighbour, but do make sure that you have the support you need - in the areas you need it - in order to worship God faithfully by not being conformed to the pattern of this world, but rather to be set apart from it, in order to do God's will in it. (see Romans 12:1-2)