

An Overview of Small Group Ministry

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Preacher: Pastor Kenoyer

[0:00] And the texts that we look at are going to be a little different in that a characteristic! of my approach to preaching is to get right to the passage pretty quickly.

! And there are a couple unrelated things that I want to draw your attention to, and then we are going to look at the subject of why we do small group ministry.

First of all, let me draw attention to one little piece. I don't know if you caught John trying to get my attention before the last two songs. He just wanted to double-check with me and see, should we sing two or should we sing one? How many of you saw that? And he actually pointed to his watch and said, go for it, John. I love listening to you sing. I want you to know that, okay? And the reason I love hearing you sing is because the music of this congregation reflects the Scriptures. I want to make this clear.

The Bible is what informs our singing. I did have a harebrained idea, and I have to confess that many of my ideas are bad. So let's just kind of let this, I'm throwing it out there, and it may not stick, but I was thinking, Connie, where are you? She's in the nursery, okay. Greg, carry this message to your wife.

I am thinking that along with the background that we have, and I like the backgrounds. I know some people like white, but I like backgrounds. Why don't we have little Scriptures that are stuck up in the corner related to the songs? How many would like that? Cheater helps, you know? It's like, so when pastor gets up and says, what passage of the Scripture did you think about? You know, okay. And in relation, I know, I know, I know, it's probably a bad idea, but just trying it out. The other one would be, we can, we, John, we let people know what songs, I mean, early on, we could put it out on the net, and so you could kind of throw those in to help Connie or whatever. It's like, I thought of this Bible passage, and I thought of that Bible passage, okay. Okay, that's one thing. The other is this.

[2:09] Over the years, one of the things that goes with being an older pastor is you end up speaking with younger pastors. Makes sense. And I have often said to younger pastors that healthy bodies tend to heal themselves. Now, you're wondering, where is he going with this? I'll get there. The reason I bring that up is because not only do healthy bodies tend to heal themselves, but healthy bodies tend to produce children. And we're blessed to have lots of kids. I'm happy for that. But one of the things that has been a challenge for us is how we care for those kids in our nurseries. Everybody smiled and said, I understand. Okay, yeah, that's where we're going. And now you make the connection, right, between healthy bodies heal themselves. We're going to solve this problem. We tried to take a step of doing this electronically. I mean, let's like, you know, we have a problem with scheduling, and so what we're going to do is we're going to rely on electronic means of doing the scheduling, and we took a shot at it, and I have to tell you that we ain't there yet. But I do want you to know that this would be the rare exception that just at the very beginning, if you want to fire up your phone or your iPad and just go to the Maranatha website and just kind of check in on how to sign in if you want to help with the nursery. We're going to talk more about that later, but there is a way for you to get there and say, hey, I'm here to help. And all God's people would say that anyway, wouldn't they? I mean, wouldn't you say, I'm ready to help? Oh, what would you say? Am I ready to help? Hey, we're all in. Healthy bodies do what? They heal

themselves. We work at this. Now, we're not there yet, but we are going to get there. And we who are involved in ministry and leadership together are going to make this work in such a fashion that when it's all over, we're going to look back on this and say, wow,

God helped us. Okay? More to come later, but do go to Maranatha. What is it? Maranatha.org? What is it? NBC. Who am I? You know, it's NBCColumbus.org, and there we are. Or you can actually talk to Pastor Andrew, and one of the dangers of talking to Pastor Andrew about electronics is he's going to say something like this, that's basic. I mean, he's done that to me. Anytime I have a computer problem, it used to be I'd call Pastor Saul and say, would you help me with this? Pastor Saul, never said that's basic. Thank you, Pastor. So now that Pastor Saul is retired, of course, he's in here every week, you know, but when I have a computer problem, and it happens occasionally, I just call Pastor Andrew and I said, I'm having a basic problem. I don't even, I just get over here. So if you're having trouble with the electronic piece of this, talk to Pastor Andrew, talk to Todd. God, we're working on this, and we'll get there. We're going to involve our coordinators in figuring out how to do this better, and remember what I said, healthy bodies what? Heal themselves.

Okay, now I'm going to preach. There's only one way to start a sermon, and that's to go to a passage.

So I want you to turn your Bibles to Acts chapter 2, verse 42. Early in my ministry, I have to confess that I remember hearing horror stories about older pastors who kept on preaching the same sermon over and over again, and I had this pathological fear of falling into that temptation, and so I consciously and deliberately said, I will not preach the same sermon twice.

[6:03] It came to my attention, however, that when I did communion on a monthly basis, guess what? I was preaching on the same topic over and over again, and I also recognized that it's appropriate around Christmas time to preach on the same thing. It's appropriate around Thanksgiving, and there are other times where preaching on the same thing is entirely appropriate, and then I realized that, you know, the truth of the matter is, is there are some things that are worth repeating all the time. One of them, for me, in my relationship with Judith, is I tell her I love her all the time. I tell her she's beautiful all the time. I tell her I am incredibly thankful for her all the time. And so things that are important deserve repetition.

And so while the subject matter today, for some of you may seem to be repetitious, I want you to understand that no true preacher of the Word can preach the same text or sermon twice.

And I say that because at the heart of biblical preaching is the enabling of the Spirit of God and His desire that the glory of Christ and the preaching of His Word be fresh and clear and passionate and convicting every time. And so I can preach the same passage more than once and rely upon the Spirit of God to make it personal and real and significant to you, even though you've heard it before. And so I want you to imagine this morning that you happen to be listening in over my shoulder when I was talking to someone who was brand new to our fellowship and they recognized that we have small groups. I mean, you can't miss that we do small group ministry here. It's there.

And so if you were listening in, the first thing that you would hear is hear me say, why do we do small group? Why is it that we're engaged in this? Why is small group ministry a significant part of our fellowship and the process whereby we engage in the ministry of helping one another grow in grace? I have to tell you that we are committed to the Scriptures and we're committed to building relationships that build saints. There in Acts chapter 2 verse 42, we find a passage that kind of gives us an idea of what the early church did. Let me read it to you.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. I suppose I can tell you this, that as we engage in the search process, we've had a number of different very profitable, very clear communications with individuals that we're considering. One question that was asked just lately was, are there any sacred cows in this fellowship?

[9:19] Do you know what a sacred cow is? I grew up in India. I know what sacred cows are. They're things that you don't touch, okay? And the deacon that was asked this question said that one of the things that we, I suppose a nicer way of saying it is one of the things that we really value and prize, not a sacred cow, would be prayer. Corporate prayer is

not just kind of an add-on for us. It's front and center. It's very significant and very important. And so when we think about those things that are center, it's not only prayer, but also small group ministry is a very significant part.

So let me explain why. Why? Well, number one, it's not a church fad. It's not something that we bought into at one point or another. I went off to a seminar and said, oh, what, this will make a significant difference and lead to having 17% growth this year.

And I have to confess that churches, like everybody else, are vulnerable to market swings and ideas and can get carried away by them. How many of you, don't raise your hand, but how many of you bought into the prayer of Jabez? Pray this 30 days in a row and blah, blah, blah. Or how many of you remember when the passion of Christ was hot? I mean, you know, the movie. I remember hearing one actual statement made by someone that I gave previous credibility to was said that this is going to be next in significance to the day of Pentecost. That was pretty substantial. I thought, whoa.

Well, okay. How about this one? How many of you remember Promise Keepers? Anybody remember Promise Keepers here? Wave at me if you remember Promise Keepers. And here we're really aging ourselves out. How many of you remember Bill Gothard and Basic Youth Conflicts? Okay. I mean, hey, things come and go. And I want to tell you, many of them met needs, but they're not here today.

Small group ministry is not something that we bought into because it's a fad. The reason we have small group ministry is because we trust the Word of God to inform us in all that we need for life and godliness. I want you to turn from that passage in Acts over to 2 Timothy chapter 2 and mark what it says in 2 Timothy about the Word of God. Interestingly, this morning as I was teaching the new members class, we were talking about why is it that our confession of faith begins, first point in our confession of faith is what we believe about the Word of God. Why is it first?

[12:10] It's because unless we have a clear understanding of what the Word of God is, everything else is very subjective. And we believe clearly that the Word of God is the inspired Word of God that we may rely upon for all that we need for life and godliness. In 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16, Paul says this, all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. What is the value? That the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. And so when we look at why we do small group ministry, I want to assure you of this, that it is because of our understanding of the Word of God and the instruction we receive from the Word as to how we go about the business of corporate life. You see, our dependence on the Scripture is not just a line in our confession of faith, it is really something that plays out in real time in the way we do things.

And I want to assure you that if our fellowship and our leadership had not seen a clear biblical warrant, now explain the difference. How many of you know the difference between a biblical command and a biblical warrant? You'll hear me use that phrase occasionally. A biblical command is something like, thou shall not commit adultery. That's a don't do this. A biblical warrant means that we see an example or a model of something and we're going to do it the same way. How many of you remember WWJD? What would Jesus do? Kind of a reminder that there are some examples that we can follow safely.

And so we are engaged in small group ministry because of a textual principle, but also because of a biblical foundation that we have to that. And in relationship to this, let me take it further and say the reason we do small group ministry is because we are convinced that biblical relationships are essential to spiritual growth and life. Biblical relationships are essential to spiritual growth and life. First of all, God made us to be in relationship with Him. And if you were to track through the Scriptures, you would find that that relationship with Him, which He initiated in the garden, broken by sin and yet nevertheless something that He designed the plan of salvation to bring about to a restoration and repair is one that puts us in union and communion with Him. And a recurring theme in Scripture that supports the issue of this relationship would be the fact that you find over and over again in Scripture a very sweet little statement, I will be their God and they will be my people.

That's Him saying, I'm in relationship with you. Not only is God committed to a relationship with us, but we also need one another for spiritual growth.

I want you to look at two different passages in a relationship there. We're going to just snap through these. But in Hebrews chapter 10 verse 24, and I'm going to just recite it, and then we're going to turn to another one. But in Hebrews it says, Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, but what are we to do? Listen to me.

[15:37] We're to encourage one another to love into good works. You're to encourage one another to love into good works. Look at where you are right now. I want you to look, just pay attention. What do you see right at eye level in front of you? Don't lift your eyes up to me. Right in front of you, what do you see?

You see the back of Matthias' head, don't you? Huh? Carla? Matthias' head? Sarah? Sarah? Mary's head, right? John, what do you see? Carla's head. Pat, what do you see? John's head.

I mean, the truth of the matter is, if we're just looking at eye level, what you see is whether or not the person combed their hair, and what color of hair they have, and how much hair they have. There are a lot of hair issues. And if you want to help each other to encourage the love and good works, you could lean forward and smack the guy on the back of the head and say, hey, do something.

But not a very good thing to do. Would you agree with me? There's got to be a better way of going about this than necessarily sitting in rows. And there is a time for sitting in rows and hearing the clear exposition of the Word of God delivered passionately with the enabling of the Spirit of God that puts you on the spot of saying, yes or no.

Okay? But there's a time we all get together. And how's that playing out in your life? How's it going? Hebrews said that we're to encourage one another to love and to good works. And I got to tell you, you're not doing it right now. And that's because something else is going on. So how do you do it?

[17:12] Look at another passage, and I want you to go here. Ephesians chapter 4 verse 15 and 16 says this, rather, speaking the truth in love, that's an operating principle and guidance that we receive.

You need to speak the truth in love to one another. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head into Christ. Now, listen to me. Characteristic of genuine conversion is that we begin to change from being who we used to be to who we will be. Everybody understands that, isn't that right? How many of you are thankful that you're not who you used to be because of the Lord Jesus Christ? How many of you recognize that He has done the work of salvation, and He is doing the work of progressive growth? How does He help you grow? It's not like a mushroom on a warm, moist night.

Most of the growth in a believer's life comes about through the work of the Spirit. In fact, all of the growth comes through the work of the Spirit of God, through the Word of God, through the, what did I say? Through the Spirit of God, through the Word of God, and through other people.

Now, what's the problem with other people helping you to grow? They're flawed. They don't always see the whole picture. It's a little messy. How many of you would realize and agree that relationships are messy? But here it is, verse 15, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. God is interested in your progression.

Progressive sanctification in your growing to be more like Jesus. And that happens in relationship with the body of Christ. You disconnect, you begin to wither in progressive sanctification.

[19:19] We need each other for spiritual growth, but we also need each other for spiritual safety. Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 9, and don't turn to it, but just let me recite the passage to you.

It says, two are better than one. And the underlying statement is there is that because when one falls, the other is there to help him up. How many of you husbands have had your wife on occasion say to you, that's not a good idea. And you are so thankful in retrospect that she had that brilliant insight that she was willing to share with you. Or a friend has said to you, whoa, stop, don't go there.

Not a good idea. We need each other for spiritual safety, and we also need each other for wisdom and counsel and admonition. Look at Galatians chapter 6. Galatians chapter 6, verse 1 and 2.

Brothers, if anybody is caught in a transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourselves, lest you too be tempted. Hey, how many of you are sin-free?

None. Do we need each other to help us in this progressive issue of our daily life? We desperately do. And here's what it says. When you see another person struggling, you're to go alongside and help him.

[20:44] You don't get very much opportunity at coming alongside when you're looking at the back of the person's head in front of you. Agreed? Okay. So, we believe that we can better follow Acts chapter 2, verse 42 in our small group setting rather than in the larger setting of our corporate worship.

And I want you to look back just in your mind. You don't need to turn to the passage itself, but Acts chapter 2 where it says they gathered and they were committed to the apostles' doctrine, which is the preaching of the Word of God. But they were also gathered for the word fellowship. That word fellowship is not, and I've said this every year, it's not church dinners, though church dinners are a good thing. In fact, we were talking yesterday in the deacon's meeting about after the morning service next Sunday when we're going to celebrate our 50th anniversary, we're going to have cake and punch. It's an opportunity to share together in the blessing of this fellowship. Getting together is good. Having food in the process is not bad.

But the word fellowship is not din din. The word koinonia is a word that actually in the Greek refers to partnership or joint participation or doing something together.

And so, when we think about what koinonia means, it means that we're actually engaged in interacting with one another. And we recognize the Scripture has given us a great deal of instruction in what we are to do together. How do I know what the Scripture says that we are to do together? There is a little statement that comes up about between 46 and 50, depending on how you're counting it, between 46 and 50 times, it says one another, one another, one another, one another. Okay? Encourage one another, admonish one another, love one another, forbear with one another, forgive one another, welcome one another. Just lots of little statements. And what the one another commands refer to is how we interact with one another in the process of being a family for the sake of spiritual growth and progress.

And so, why do we do small groups? We do small groups because of our understanding of Scripture. And so, we would say it this way, we are committed to building relationships that build saints.

[23:18] Why do we do small groups? Because we're committed to build relationships that build saints. And we realize that relationships take a different kind of structure than sitting in rows.

So, how do we do small groups? Essentially, what we do is we spend time together nurturing biblical relationships and working at the one another's. One of the things that has characterized our small group ministry is longevity and continuity in relationship. And that is not forced by design. Every January, actually it's in December when we have a recast. I don't know what the word would be, but every January or every December when we close off for the year, we give everybody a chance to decide what small group they want to be in for the next year.

And so, if you decide you want to move, you have the liberty of moving. Not from the church. From the small group. But do you know what happens most of the time?

Tom, where are you? Thank you. Tom and Todd, where's Todd? There. Okay. Tom and Todd with Pastor Andrew kind of do the, everybody gets to put in a ballot and we draw. It's like casting lots. It's kind of whatever. And what percentage of people have stayed in the same small group over and over again?

Ballpark number. Isn't that amazing? 95. How many figured out that the relationship you're in is probably as safe as the one you could be going to? Hello? Everybody smile at me. You understand that?

[25:00] Our people are figuring that out. You might as well work it out where you are, then pack up and go somewhere else and start over again. Now, that doesn't mean we don't have changes occasionally. Changes in schedule, changes in family structure, there are changes that happen, but people voluntarily choose to stay in the same relationships. I think

that's unbelievably commendable.

And it's not forced by any formal design. So, how do we do small groups? Number one, we meet in small groups with godly leadership and helpers.

I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the leadership of this fellowship. The men who partner with the pastoral staff as deacons and the families who partner together with the congregation for the sake of small group ministry, our small group leaders have been so valuable to the well-being of this body. And we rely upon their willingness to be servants to the bride of Christ.

And I want you to hear me say it, don't ever take your small group leader for granted. They're a gift from Christ. And you should pray for them, you should thank them for their ministry.

By the way, I understand the Greens had their entire house moved in what? Two hours. Two hours. How many people were there? About 30.

[26:49] That was not all my sons moving company. That was not two men in a truck. That was not college hunks and trucks with junk or whatever it is.

I know I was getting myself in trouble, but I'm trying. I'm trying. Okay. It was our family caring for one another. And our small group leaders were right there in the mix along with our deacons. By the way, I was an exception and our search committee was an exception to that rule. Do you know what we were doing? We're praying. We're working. We're hoping. Right? Okay. Just to let you know that. Okay. So we meet together in small groups with godly leadership. We meet together for about two hours to focus on welcome. That means, hi, how are you doing? How's things going? Worship. That means singing together. That means sharing together. By the way, perhaps the most consistent blessing in every one of our small groups across the...how many years have we done this? I forget.

Number. One of the most consistent blessings is the prayer time that we have. I'm a believer in corporate prayer. But the way in which we have done corporate prayer on Wednesday night means that for the most part, the same people don't pray together every Wednesday, right? Kind of bounce around different things, different things. And when you pray in the small group, you know the people from week to week to week. And when someone says, man, pray for me because I'm having a struggle at the job, you get to see that guy next week and say, how did it go? I was praying for you all week.

[28:24] I sent you a couple texts. How is it? We pray together. We study the Word together. Oh, we eat together. And we do projects together periodically. And so remind yourself, this is part of what we do.

We also, as we talk about how we do it, we schedule times periodically where all of our small groups meet together. We call them family gatherings. And we do that one Sunday evening every month.

And that time is a time where we gather together to study the Scriptures as a corporate body. We study issues that are front and center to our fellowship. I'll give you a little heads up. In the future, in the near future, on those occasions when we have a family gathering, I am going to be preaching, studying first and then preaching on how to find Jesus in every line. Okay? It's pretty easy to see Jesus in the New Testament. Everybody agrees with me on that one? It gets a little more complicated and a little more demanding that we begin thinking carefully about where else is Jesus and the entire Scriptures resonate with His reality. So, we're going to study that. So, let me come down to this.

What can you do in your small group? First, believe what God says about the importance of lasting relationships. It is no accident that God designed marriage to be lifelong. It is no accident that God designed family relationships to be lifelong. And I got to tell you that we learn and grow over time, and we need each other together for that to take place. One of the distinct privileges of being the pastor at the same place for a long time is you've got to watch me change. I was talking with the new members class, and I said, you know, when I was younger, I was a whole lot more brassy. You guys have been incredibly patient and enduring with my slow learning process. And I've watched you change. I tell you, you do not know how much pleasure a pastor it is to be able to look out in a congregation and see the evidence of the grace of God having brought people through one or another issue, and you know

He's done this. Do you know why I can say to unbelievers, you don't have to stay the miserable person that you are? Because I've watched Him at work. And you don't get to see that if every

couple years you're bopping off to another place. Believe what God says about the importance of lasting relationships. Secondly, accept that relationships take work. Let me say that slowly so you don't miss it.

[31:11] Relationships take work. We need one another. But since the day that sin entered the world, relationships are hard. That's why we find so many texts that give us explicit instructions on how to work at relationships. Let me give you just a couple to remind you of them. For one, I got to tell you, over and over again in the Bible, it says love one another. Why say that? Love one another. If you are the parent or have been the parent of more than one child, one of the things that you've had to say to your children repetitiously is, love your brother. Love your sister. And the reason you have said that probably is not because there was a lot of warm fuzzy going on at the moment. You dealt with that issue and said, hey, here's what you need. Work at it. Another thing that goes with the working in a relationship is forgiving one another. Any lasting relationship happens only when people continue to forgive and work with one another in their relationship. I got to tell you, one of the things that I'm convinced of, and I want you to hear me say this, is that a mark of spiritual maturity and progress is how easily we're offended and how quickly we get over the offense. Do you follow that?

How easily we're offended and how quickly we get over the offense. And a key to getting over an offense is forgiving. By the way, I only want you to forgive. I don't want you to forgive any way beyond how Jesus has been forgiving of you, right? Got that? All I want you to do is kind of forgive like Jesus has forgiven you. Another is forbear with one another. The word forbear means kind of put up with some of the aspects of the weakness in other people. How many of you have certain areas of your life that are just spot on, you're right on top of it? I mean, have you ever noticed how the areas that you're right on just don't match up with your partner, your wife, or whatever else? And it kind of irritates you that she just doesn't have it all together in that area, right? I could tell a story on myself.

I am punctual to a fault. I mean, 10 minutes early is borderline late. I came to the deacon's meeting yesterday actually one minute ahead of time. I was, God brought a wonderful wife into my life, and guess what her attitude towards punctuality is?

It's like some of you. If it's before we're singing the invitation, there's no problem. Okay. That took you a while to get there. I understand. Here's what I'm not real good at, cleaning up messes. I am a perpetual remodeler, but after I'm finished starting on a project, I lay the tools down, and somehow providentially, just like my laundry, they end up back in the right place. It's like, how does that happen? Thank you, Jesus. You know, it's like, okay, we put up with one another's frailties because we love each other. So, number one, believe what God says about lasting relationships, except that relationships take work. Third, stay the course and engage in what your small group is doing. You can't be a kind of occasional drift in and drift out person and get the benefit of what small groups is all about. It just won't work.

[35:06] A person comes to me and says, well, I don't have any friends here. Really? So, if you're flying in here low and kind of dropping into a seat the last minute and then bugging out right after, you know, how do I have a relationship with you? It's, hi, bye. You know, it's a relationship take time. How many figured that out? Relation, let me say it slowly. Relationships take time. Stay the course.

Invest in it. Finally, pray, participate, and be consistent in your small group. Not hard to say small group ministry is not a place and not a structure that is designed for anonymity.

It's designed for relationship and for continuity. And so, if you're going to be part of what God has designed as relationship for the sake of progressive sanctification, I'm not saying this is the only way to do it, but it is the way we have found to be most effective. And so, I'd plead with you this morning, you come before the Lord and say, I am interested in continuing to grow spiritually. Check. I realize that that is going to take time. Check. And I am going to commit to invest with a certain group of people that I will spend time with for the sake of growing to be more like Christ. Check. So, by the way, quiz question. What's the purpose of biblical preaching? Does anybody know? Can you

say it with me? The purpose of preaching is to bring people to the point of saying yes or no to God. Okay? So, I encourage you this morning to make a commitment to trust Him and to seek His glory in building relationships that build saints. Let's close in prayer.

Our Father God, we are committed this morning to be Your people. We're incredibly blessed to have the Scriptures in our hand, to enjoy the ministry of Your Holy Spirit in our lives as believers, and we're thankful that we're part of a body that is committed to help us grow in grace.

We want to have a humble heart to submit ourselves to one another and to the work that You're doing among us. And we would ask this in Your precious name. Amen. Let's stand together.