

Small Groups: Engage in Christ

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again, and welcome to faith. So glad that we're here together today, and we're going to be in John chapter 17 today. And for those of you, if you remember earlier this year, we spent some time there in John chapter 17, and spent six weeks looking at what it means to be making disciples, and God's plan for us to build His kingdom.

And that is all of us, as followers of Jesus Christ, making disciples of others, and that's God's plan for us to impact the world.

He's given us a strategy to reach the world, and it's called disciple-making, and He's called all of us to be doing that. So what I want us to do this morning is pick up from that same chapter, but beginning in verse number 20 of John chapter 17, this is a prayer that Jesus is praying for His disciples.

And that's the predominant focus, not for so much the world around, but for the particular ones that He had chosen to work through, and for those to work through others, and others to work through others, and the multiplication process that we call disciple-making.

Jesus was about to go to the cross, and He was speaking to His Father in heaven, and He was talking about the unity.

[1 : 35] He was talking about the relationship that He wanted His disciples to have with one another, the same relationship that He has with the Father.

Let's begin this morning in John chapter 17 and verse number 20. As Jesus prays this, He says, I do not pray for these alone, these particular individuals that Jesus had chosen, but He says, also for those who will believe in Me through their word.

And who is that? That's us today. Not only His disciples, but us today, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one as you, Father, are in Me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent Me.

And the glory which you gave Me, I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one, I in them, and you in Me, that they may also, that they may be made perfect in one or complete in one, and that the world may know that you have sent Me and have loved Me, love them as you have loved Me.

Father, I desire that they also whom you gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which you have given Me, for you loved Me before the foundation of the world.

[3 : 11] O righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these have known that you sent Me. And He finishes it up in verse 26, Let's pray.

Lord, this morning, use Your Word to teach us and to help us understand Your will for us to reach the world today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now we're going to be primarily looking at verses 20 to verse 23, and let Jesus' prayer give us really a picture of what God has designed for His body, the church, and really all the way back to creation. We're going to be spending a little bit of time in Genesis, looking at the creation, looking at what God has done, and seeing that that's even a picture that God has given us in the book of Genesis in the act of creation in what His will is for the body of Christ, and why that's even significant for us as Faith Bible Church.

And when we talk about community, and when we talk about small groups, and when we talk about the body of Christ getting together to do body life, to be enjoying one another's presence, to be encouraging one another, to be spurring one another on to good works, and when we talk about this is going to be a series about small groups, but when I say small groups, that's really everything that the body does together outside of the corporate Sunday morning worship time.

[5 : 02] That could be Sunday school. That could be Sunday evening Bible study. That could be Awana. That could be the women's prayer time on the one Sunday a month.

That could be the men's prayer breakfast. That could be you gathering together with guys, with a few other guys to pray together. That's a small group. That's the body coming together to encourage one another, growing, making disciples.

It could be you and one other person. These are all things that God has planned for the body of Christ beyond the gathering together of the entire body together to worship Him.

So that's what we're going to be looking at. And I would like us to see this morning five things, or five things that we're going to see this morning, five reasons that we have in our notes, and why the body life, why the body of Christ in community is important to Him, and is important.

Well, first of all, the first reason we see in your notes is community gathering together to do life is the pattern of our Creator.

[6 : 21] It's the pattern that God has given us. What's interesting to see is when you come to this prayer, Jesus is praying for all who would believe in His name through the disciples.

And listen to this. In verse 21, He says, that they all may be one. He says, Father, just like you and I are one, that they may be one as well.

Now, this is really theologically important. As Jesus is praying this prayer, where He says, just as you and I are one, just as you are in me and I in you, we've got to realize that from the very beginning of God's Word, the very beginning of creation, God is multiple individuals within one Godhead.

Because even in the first verse of God's Word, it is God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit involved in creation.

He uses the plural pronoun, we, as He speaks of Himself. So even the Godhead is in community, and they are in concert with everything that they do.

[7 : 39] This is a conversation between God and the Father that He has, Jesus has. We see that God, even in the Old Testament, is using the same thing.

We've got God in three persons existing in one Godhead. And He says that the same relationship that you and I have, I want them to have.

Who's the them? These twelve, but also us, who would believe in His name. And I think we've got an incredible picture here in John 17 of the fact that what we see is we have been invited.

We, the body of Christ that exists today, based on Jesus' prayer back there in the garden, is that we have been invited to join in the mystery of divine community.

God is in community with Himself. Now that blows my mind. And it ought to blow your mind too, because we can't understand the Trinity. We'll never understand the Godhead, how God can be one God, existing with one essence, yet in three distinct persons, personalities, however we choose.

[8 : 50] But for us to be able to, as the body of Christ today, join in that divine community. Think about it. You and I share life with the Creator. You and I share life with God the Father.

You and I share life with God the Son. You and I share life with the Holy Spirit. And through Christ, we share life with one another. We should never meet a Christian stranger.

Think about it. They may speak a different language. You may have absolutely no language capability, but have the same love, have the same Christ, have the same Spirit that lives within them.

And the Bible talks about that our spirit communicates with another spirit. I experience, any of you who've traveled to other countries, any of you who've traveled the world, I've experienced it in other countries with a language barrier, but yet there was that same relationship they had with Jesus that I had with my Lord.

And even with the language barrier, we were able to share that love together, share life together. And that's a picture we have from the very beginning because it's the way God designed it.

[10 : 06] And what I also see is God desires for His glory. We see in John 17, verses 20 through 23, Jesus talks about the glory that He had with the Father.

He wants us sharing that same glory. God desires for His glory to be the foundation of our community. Because why are we together? Because of Jesus.

And the glory that Jesus shared with the Father is the same glory that God wants shown and shared in you and me as we're in community together.

Now that's huge. It's not some manufactured glory. You know, it's not some polish that we put on the Christian life. It's God. And He's the one.

It's His party. And He's the one that makes it exciting. It doesn't matter what flavor of music that you're involved with.

[11 : 04] It doesn't matter what you wear. It matters is that we're in community with God the Father and we have the same relationship together. And there's a personal unity that we have with Him.

And it's that same foundation of God's glory, the unity that we're able to have with other believers. And the reality is, He's saying that we are to be unified, but unity is different from uniformity.

We won't all look alike. Because think about the early church. Early church was made up of Jews, Gentiles, slaves, slave owners, indentured servants, the rich, the poor, and the homeless.

That was the church. Because whoever comes to know Christ as their Savior, when they come together, they are the church.

And it was so diverse, but they were unified in the one thing, and that was Jesus Christ and the relationship they had with Him. And what Scripture's teaching us here is that there's an eternal glory that God has entrusted to us through the Son of God, through Jesus Christ.

[12 : 21] That's why we as one family can come from every tribe, every nation, and still enjoy that unity together. Come together on different socioeconomic levels.

Come together from different backgrounds. And come together even with different language barriers. Because there are churches that are not only multicultural, there are churches that are multilingual.

They may not speak the same language. They may meet at different times. But you know what? They're part of the same body of Christ. And so I think we need to realize that unity does not come from uniformity.

Unity comes from the foundation and the glory we have in God. Christ is the foundation. Not only that, but God desires for our community, if we just flip it around, is this.

God desires for our community. Remember, God, Jesus said, I want your glory, the glory that you and I share. I want them who will come to know Christ, who will come to know me as their Savior, to share in that same glory.

[13 : 25] But I think what He also wants is if we kind of flip that around is, God desires for our community that we share as the body of Christ to be the reflection of His glory to the world.

To be His glory to the world. That's what Jesus is praying in John 17. Look at it. Verse 21. That they all may be as one. He's talking about us.

As you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us. Now, don't miss this. You got to see the context.

And what is it? He wants us to share that glory so that what? The world may also believe. How will the world see it?

They will see us. And they will see the community and the love and the unity that we have. Jesus is acknowledging that His glory would be reflected in the way His church related to one another.

[14 : 28] And so when the world sees the church, when the world sees the body of believers, the world looks at us and says, how are they? Are they bickering? Are they infighting? Are they loving one another?

Are they backbiting? Are they caring for one another? Are they sharing with one another? Are they being selfish? Are they being prideful?

Are they... Whatever. Whatever. And Jesus says, how the world views me is how the world is going to view you or is going to be based on how the world views you.

Because a lost world cannot see God. But they can see you. And they can see me. I think what Jesus is saying is important here.

If the world sees Christians loving on one another and caring for one another, they will believe that God is love. If they see people sharing with one another, if they see Christians dispensing grace with one another, rather than holding it against one another, they're going to see that, well, God must be a God of grace.

[15 : 38] If, at times, they might see church discipline, they might say, oh, well, I guess God is a God of judgment. God is a God of justice. So I ought to be careful.

So what the world sees in us is a representation of the way God works in us. Because if they reject us, they will probably reject God as well.

One of my favorite authors, he was popular in the 1970s, was Francis Schaeffer, an apologist. I love his writings. Some of his writings you actually have to read a few times in order to be able to fully understand them.

But this is one of his, one of the things he said in one of his books. He said, our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful.

Christian community is the final apologetic. I am convinced that our increasingly relativistic world, increasingly pluralistic and skeptical culture that we live in that the greatest apologetic, the greatest defense for the Christian faith is a church that loves and cares and sacrifices for each other like Christ has designed us to.

[16:58] That's really important. Christ expects and Christ desires his community to be the reflection of his glory in the world. Because they can't see him, they can see us.

And so we are to be representing that. Jesus died to make it possible. And the Holy Spirit lives in us to make it possible. The Holy Spirit frees us up to be able to please him so that we can represent that to the world.

It's why we walk together. It's why the church walks together. We were talking in Sunday school this morning about, and mentioned about when we go out and so the world does not influence us.

Jesus said how it is disciples by two. He sent them in community so they could hold one another up, hold each other accountable, encourage one another so that the world would not influence them but that they could influence the world as they had interaction with those who didn't know Jesus.

Because it's the pattern of our creator. That's the way Jesus did it because he wants to display his glory. So first of all we have the pattern of our creator. Next we have the plan of creation.

[18:12] We see how Jesus prayed and how Jesus did it but then we also see the plan of creation. We'll look at Genesis for a moment. Genesis 1 starting with verse 27.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him male and female. He created them. Then God blessed them.

God said to them be fruitful and multiply fill the earth and subdue it have dominion over the fish of the sea over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

So what happens is God created us in his own image. Now what does that mean? Does it mean that God looks like us? God has the same kind of ears? God has... No. He is in community with himself meaning God the Father God the Son God the Holy Spirit when Jesus was on earth who did he communicate with?

His Father in heaven. So they remained in community throughout Jesus' time on earth. So as we ask this question I believe two primary truths come out as we ask what does it mean to be made in God's image?

[19:24] Number one God created us to enjoy life in him. God created Adam in the garden to enjoy him. God created Adam gave him a place to be and God spent time with Adam every day.

God created us to enjoy God. He created us to enjoy him. But all was not good in paradise. Let's go to Genesis 2:18.

And the Lord God said it is not good. It is not good that man should be what? Alone. I will make him a helper suitable, neat, or comparable to him.

Perfect creation yet something was missing. Primarily man and woman were made for community with one another. Husband and wife.

But that's not all because as we go through the rest of scripture we see we need other people as well. We need other individuals as well. We have family. We need more than family.

[20:37] We need others to influence them and for them to influence us as the body of Christ as we grow and spur one another to love and to good works.

There are some things that you probably can't share with your family or your family won't pay attention to you. It takes someone from outside to have impact on you sometimes because sometimes you listen to your children.

You raise them. You're the one that's supposed to be influencing them. Sometimes it takes someone from outside of your family to influence you. The same thing with children. Mom and dad can tell you until they're blue in the face.

Sometimes it takes somebody else that you respect to tell you, oh, that's what mom and dad's been trying to tell me all this time. That's the way it works sometimes. We need others.

That means God created us to experience life with each other. God expects his church to go through life together, to experience life together.

[21 : 41] That's what we're going to see. He didn't create us to go through life alone. We need community. We need the body of Christ. We need the community in whom God is.

This we see is how we're created. Next, we see the pattern of our creator. We see the plan of creation. God created us to be in community. But then we also see the precedent of Christ. We see the precedent that Christ set when he was here on earth for how he expected those who followed him to go through life. Go back to John 17.

We look at the precedent that he set because when Jesus was praying this prayer, he was praying for a small group. He was not praying for the world. He was praying for a small group of individuals. His predominant focus was on this small group of guys that he spent the majority of his time with. When Jesus was with a crowd, he said hard stuff that pushed them away.

[22 : 43] When Jesus was with his disciples, with this small group that he had chosen, he was preparing them to have the impact on the larger group. And so what Jesus was doing was showing that it's difficult to follow him.

And he was spending time with these guys. This was his strategy. He was going to win the world through a small group. Don't miss it. Jesus' method.

If we look at Jesus comes to earth and he had a plan of attack. Jesus' plan to reach the world for reaching the multitudes, was a small group of men.

That's where he spent the majority of his time. That was a precedent he set. He used a small group to reach the world. But if you look in your notes, down here on the bottom of that first page, you see a few lists in different places, in different of the Gospels, different disciples are mentioned.

But you notice there are some of the names in bold. These names in bold were always mentioned pretty much in this same order. The other guys, some were left out in some list, some were talked about in different places, in different groups.

[23 : 58] But these guys who were in bold, Peter, Philip, James, John, these guys were mentioned over and over again. Peter was always mentioned first in every list.

Why do you think? Peter was pretty much going to be recognized as the leader of the apostles. And so Jesus, and when Jesus went off, maybe on a little side trip, what did he do?

He would take Peter, James, John, sometimes Andrew, and he spent time with three or four guys, way more time than he spent with the rest, because he saw greater potential in these men, and so he invested way more time in these men, and he was using them to accomplish his will on the earth.

Then we have the other guys, the different disciples that we don't hear very much from. So we see these guys subdivided into even smaller groups. Jesus invested in people.

And I think what we can say safely today is, God's plan is people, not programs. God's plan is people, not programs, or methods for winning the world to himself.

[25 : 18] It doesn't matter how much money a local church has, it doesn't matter how glitzy and how polished the programs are, it's still people reaching people, because the program doesn't reach people.

Programs are not bad if we understand the priority. It doesn't matter if you've got a cool program, you've got to have people that love people, you've got to have people that are called, you've got to have people that love people, and are going to be reaching other people.

It's the same with Awana, same with Sunday school, it's the same with whatever we do. God's plan is people.

So we have, Jesus chose one guy, then two, then 12. By the time you get to Acts 1, it's 120. 120.

By the time you get past that, it's hundreds, thousands, and thousands, and then it's milk.

See the process. It explodes with growth as he goes. But if we're not careful, even small groups can turn into programs. And think, oh, you know, we've got to keep this program alive.

[26 : 32] Well, sometimes programs die. People have different life cycles. Programs have different life cycles. And so that's where we see we have to adapt as people change.

And sometimes, you know what, we might have a group on Saturday. Well, sometimes people's schedules change, and well, do it on Tuesday. The program and the time is not that important.

It's people and what we invest in them. And Jesus showed us why small groups, Sunday school, Bible study, times of prayer together, were so important.

So we see the pattern of the Creator. We see the plan of creation. The plan was community. It was not good that man was alone. And then we see the precedent of Christ that he set with choosing a small group of men and investing his life in them in order that they might reach the world. But then we see the practice of the early church. The practice of the early church. Let's go on a little tour. We're going to take it very, very quickly through, starting with Acts chapter 2, verse number 46, and to show a few of the practices of the early church, how the early church put what Jesus prayed into action.

[27 : 52] We see the, excuse me, the practice of the early church. That is what the early church did. So we see in Acts 2, 46, so continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.

Now how did the early church survive without a worship center? Well, they met in homes, small groups. A home couldn't fit 100 people. A home might fit 20, might have fit 25. If it was an extremely large home, you might have had maybe 30 people. But they met from house to house and they did life.

They casually got together. They got together also on purpose. Disciples, discipleship happens really outside the four walls of, for us, the building in which we meet.

Now let's fast forward to Acts 12. So, when he had considered this, the Bible says, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

[29 : 02] They were meeting together. They were spending time in prayer together. We don't have to wait for the church to organize a prayer time.

Yes, the ladies have an organized prayer time once a month on Sunday evening. Sometimes many show up, sometimes none show up. But the point is, there is a time scheduled. And when you are together, you can pray.

But don't wait for the church to schedule everything. Have someone, they say, you know what, let's get together and pray because there's a need I think we need to be praying for. Call somebody up on the phone. Meet them for coffee. Have them come over to your house.

Go over to their house. And be together as the body of Christ. Then we go on. Next. The next one is one of my favorite stories in the New Testament because it reminds me that Paul also was a long-winded preacher.

Why do you laugh? Acts 20, 7 and 8. Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them, and continued his message until midnight.

[30 : 10] I promise you, we will not be here until midnight. What I actually have started doing, and it's a cool thing, proclaim the presentation software we have. They're always coming out with something brand new and cool.

You know what they just came out with? You can't see it, but I can. It's a little countdown timer. And for me, it's a count up timer.

We've been here 30 minutes and 36 seconds in the message. And I'm going, my goal every week is be 35 minutes. Okay? So I'm going to try to make 35.

Might make 38, but my point is, I'm not going to be here until midnight. But what Paul was doing here, they were meeting together. They had gotten together on the first day of the week to break bread.

They ate together. They enjoyed. You know what? Eating is a very personal thing. That's why some people don't like eating in front of someone else, because it can be very embarrassing.

[31 : 09] You know, food and your teeth and stuff. It can be embarrassing. But when we're willing to open ourselves up to that, to share something as personal as eating with someone else, it can bring us, it can draw us closer together.

You know, some of you might be watching what you eat. Some of you might not be. So, you know, pair up with somebody else who's eating particularly healthy. You know what? Go eat a salad somewhere.

You know, if you're not necessarily, you know, enjoy pizza. Everybody loves pizza. Amen. Amen. You know, go do something. Even if it's just today after church, if it may be, hey, you know what? Let's go to whatever the local pizza place is. Go eat somewhere. Sunday evenings, it may be, hey, let's go to, and I'm going to suggest something healthy, go to one of these frozen yogurt places.

Even if it's just going and sitting down together with another couple or with another family. And enjoy, or just go to the park and don't eat. I mean, just, you know, just see the ducks and do whatever.

[32 : 15] What I'm saying is enjoy life together. Just a couple more examples. Look at Romans. Romans, let's look at, well, verse 8, there were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together.

Look at Romans 16, 5. Likewise, greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Eponatus, who is of the first fruits of Achaia to Christ. Here again, small group. Now we go over to 1 Corinthians 16, 19. Churches of Asia greet you. Aquila, Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord with the church that is in their house.

So what we see is the early church meeting together. But one of the things that we see is it didn't take long because at one time in the New Testament, beginning of the New Testament, all the Old Testament, if you wanted to meet God, you had to go to the temple.

Christianity comes in. People were meeting together in houses, very, very personal. And before too long, it didn't take too long to go back to the old way of doing things.

[33 : 24] Now I realize this is kind of an oversimplification of church history, but about 250 A.D. Cyprian of Carthage begins to make a difference between the laity and the clergy.

Like there are some professional Christians and there are some common Christians, and it's the professional Christians that kind of are over the common Christians. So before this time, there was really not that big of a, there was not a clarification.

You know, it's like other than the elder, the one that God had chosen or the elders to lead, beside that, you know, there was not that much of a distinction. And then you have about 313 A.D., Constantine says Christianity is now legalized and they can, you know, you can build church buildings now for the clergy to preach in.

And so now the church begins to be identified with buildings rather than with these smaller groups of believers coming together and doing life together.

So we have, so this was the practice of the early church. But the reality is, I know we talk about, and I said this before, and we still do, we always will, we talk about I'm going to church.

[34 : 44] The reality is this place is just a building. Reality is we are the church. We are the church. We're the body of Christ. We are to be in community together.

We learn from one another. We grow together. Corporate worship on Sunday morning is important and it's necessary for the health of the body. But that's really not where the true growth takes place. We grow together. We encourage one another. We hold each other accountable in smaller gatherings of believers. We help each other grow. You know, that kind of community cannot happen when we're all seated in rows looking at the backs of another Christian's head.

You know, that's not where real growth takes place. Now, we might learn things intellectually in this setting. We might pray together corporately in this setting.

But true spiritual growth as we spur one another up, as we encourage one another, as we hold each other accountable, really doesn't happen in this setting.

[35 : 48] It happens outside the four walls when the body gets together in smaller groups. It might just be you and an accountability partner. It might be you and a Bible study of three or four people that get together at McDonald's, get together somewhere and opens the Bible and prays and learns God's word.

And that's where these things are important. We look, small groups were key to the church's sanctification. The bulk of the New Testament talks about learning together, teaching one another, all about community.

Romans 6, 1 through 23 is an exhortation. Most of the Bible was written to local believers who were in community together, meeting in homes. The last half of Ephesians is challenging the church to holiness individually.

Hebrews 10, 19 through 25, the stern warning to the Hebrews, don't forsake the assembling of ourselves together because that's where you spur one another. That's where you kind of hold each other.

We have a responsibility to one another in the body of Christ. Christianity was never intended to be lived in isolation. Small groups were crucial to their multiplication.

[37 : 14] Christianity expanded from house to house. It expanded as the body of Christ reached out to others that didn't know Christ. See, they were around unbelievers so they could impact them. And gradually they brought them into the body. Isn't that a great picture? We go out, share Jesus so that we can bring them in. And that's the picture that Jesus wants of the church. And we see the potential of the church today. It's been the pattern of our creator from the beginning. The precedent was set by Jesus Christ. We saw the pattern of the early church. It was the church doing life together. They met in the temple as a large group, and then they also met house to house as smaller groups. I think one of the overarching truths in John 17 is this. Biblical community and biblical mission are inseparable. We reach the world with each other. We don't reach the world alone.

[38 : 20] We don't reach others for Christ by ourselves. We need to do it in community. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs.

And we realize that we can't truly do it alone. It is inseparable. We also see we want to give ourselves to the most effective avenue for disciple-making to occur.

And that's in community. So we see very quickly go through these. Small groups are biblical. Early church got together. They ate together. They prayed together. Small groups are simple.

It doesn't take a program. It takes, for us, it's really simple. It takes a text. Hey, let's meet at, and you're off and running. Small groups are reproducible.

We can do this on Tuesday. We can be with another group on Thursday. And doing the same thing, reproducing ourselves across neighborhoods.

[39 : 23] You will have influence that I will never have. I have influence you will never have. And so these can be reproducible. Small groups are cross-cultural. You probably work with people who are not just like you.

You may be in a neighborhood with people who are not just like you. You have influence on different groups of people. And culture is not just race.

Culture is not just religion. Culture can be, do you realize that physicians have a culture? And a physician will most likely be the best candidate to reach another physician.

Do you realize attorneys probably most likely be reached by other attorneys because they spend a lot of time together. And they have the same lingo.

Same thing with teachers. The same thing with plant workers. The same thing with, because you share a commonality. And so it can be cross-cultural too, where you can, you see, realize a church comes together of all different types of people.

[40 : 27] Consider spending time discipling others. And here's the thing. I believe we should want to give ourselves to the most intentional advancement of the gospel. We can be intentional.

Say, you know what? I want to put this evangelistic Bible study together so that we can do this.