IMPROVING THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

OF THE BEULAH BAPTIST CHURCH,

DOUGLASVILLE, GEORGIA

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Presented to

the Faculty of

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by

Phillip Wayne Bray

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

IMPROVING THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

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Phillip Wayne Bray


Read and Approved by:


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Dr. Michael S. Wilder (Faculty Supervisor)


_____
Dr. Troy W. Temple


Date _____

In loving memory of

Linda Spriggs (1946-2011),

a gift from God to my family.

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PREFACE

The completion of this project would have been impossible without the immeasurable contributions of those who assisted me during these past few years of study at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. While many from the seminary faculty have challenged me, my faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Wilder, has provided a consistent combination of high expectations and gracious patience. He has proven to be more than a teacher to this student. Dr. Troy Temple has given much assistance as well, providing necessary guidance throughout this process.

The staff of Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia, provided much support and assistance with the implementation of the principles of this project. Julie Hanes spent countless hours with the pastoral staff planning and executing the project. Her leadership as Director of Education was invaluable.

God has graciously given me much support from my friends through this process. Terry Pearman, Will Murray, and Jon Sullivan have made significant contributions through their ministry efforts, allowing me to focus the needed time on the completion of this project. They are more than exceptional associate pastors. They have proven themselves to be priceless friends.

In reality, the project would have been impossible without the faithfulness of God's people at Beulah Baptist Church. This faith family has shown great support and encouragement to their pastor of these past few years. God has used this congregation in earnest prayer and faithful practice of ministry. A man can attempt to lead a group of

people to accomplish a goal, but success would be impossible without the cooperation of the body of Christ.

My family has also been extremely supportive, making many sacrifices over through the entirety of this academic endeavor. My father and mother, Phil and Harriette Bray, have supported me all along the way. Words cannot express my gratitude for their selfless display of love for me during this time of study. Likewise, my in-laws, David and Sandra Pike, have always loved me like their own son. Our four children, Will, Jake, Zach, and Emmie, have never know a dad outside of seminary training. They have always supported my efforts and are an inspiration to me in ministry.

My number one supporter is my wife. Amy has consistently provided unmatched support for me in every area. During this project, she has supported me by reading countless pages and editing many mistakes. Amy has always motivated me to press on toward the goal, even in the most challenging of circumstances. Aside from Christ Himself, she is God's greatest gift to me.

<div style="text-align: right">Phillip W. Bray</div>

Lousiville, Kentucky

December 2011

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to strengthen ministry performance, while renewing congregational commitment to the Small Group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia.

**Goals**

This writer aspired to achieve three specific goals through this project. These goals were utilized in measuring the effectiveness of the project at its conclusion. They were drawn from scripture and relevant to the unique ecclesiastical issues found at the Beulah Baptist Church.

The first goal of this project was to teach the attendees of Beulah Baptist Church about the foundational purposes of small group ministry. Comprehensive attendance reports were provided, revealing the categorized percentages of all small group attendance for various groups, ages, and genders. The church staff produced a detailed publication of the various small groups available to the congregation. This presentation outlined specific differences that made each small group unique. The staff then evaluated the effectiveness and efficiency of small group structure and practice.

The second goal was to help the congregants realize the Christian benefits of participating in the biblical community found in an effective small group. This campaign for awareness included a sermon series from the pastor, explaining the biblical support for a small group ministry. A devotional journal was also prepared and provided for each small group participant during this same time. Finally, a team of leaders from every small group was recruited by the Director of Education, hoping to intentionally motivate and communicate with the intent of increasing participation among the church body. This challenging process affirmed the faithful, encouraged the inconsistent, and challenged the irregular attendees to give small groups a try. The hope was to create a newfound passion for discipleship through the small group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church.

The third goal was to make proper adjustments to the philosophy and practice of small group ministry, attempting to stimulate a 10% increase in the small group participation compared to the previous year's records. The staff also attempted to close the gap between worship and small group attendance by 5%. The hope was to increase small group participation in a majority of individuals currently attending the church, regardless of his/her particular developmental stage of spiritual maturity or the past level of personal involvement in the educational ministries of the church.

Small groups were already a powerful tool for the development of community and discipleship, but the body of believers at Beulah had a need for greater participation in this process of ministry. The simple establishment of a small group ministry did not ensure spiritual success. People needed to understand the need for Christian community in this family of faith. There was a need to recognize the benefit of developing these small groups as a means of biblical discipleship. Finally, the congregation was expected to affirm these realities by a demonstrated increase in participation. The staff hoped that

by communicating the purpose and benefits of community and discipleship, the congregation's attendance would naturally increase. By achieving these stated goals, the small group ministry of Beulah Baptist Church would be greatly improved.

## Context

A proper understanding of the context of ministry at Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia, was needed in order to fully realize the project's results. These general characteristics are explained below.

### Douglasville, Georgia

Douglasville, Georgia, is located in west metro Atlanta, northern Douglas County. Only four miles separate Douglasville from its smaller neighbor, Lithia Springs. Beulah Baptist Church sits in the direct center of these two traditional townships. While Beulah Baptist Church is located in Douglas County, it is technically outside the city limits of Douglasville, being found within three miles of two additional metro Atlanta counties, Cobb and Paulding. Therefore, demographically speaking, the field of prospects for Beulah Baptist Church stretches deep into three unique Georgia counties.

Cobb County Georgia is a suburban/urban combination, which experienced explosive growth through the 1980s and 1990s. Paulding County is presently one of the fastest growing counties in the United States, but it is much more rural than both Douglas and Cobb Counties. Douglas County is a combination of Cobb and Paulding Counties, characterized by a busy metro population with a sustained rural feel.

Prior to the 1990s Douglas County had managed to remain a relatively small town, though less than 20 miles from the Atlanta city limits. During the past two decades, however, this county has experienced unprecedented growth, bringing much prosperity to

the local economy, but much complication to the community's infrastructure. This once rural farming community now finds itself in the midst of a radical transformation, and many long-time citizens have wrestled with the decision to relocate their families to a less metropolitan environment.

Housing costs have increased significantly, while school facilities and community resources were immediately found insufficient for the influx of new people. Commercial expansion brought even more challenges to Douglas County. With the construction of a major mall and countless restaurants came horrendous traffic and even more people. The general consensus of Douglas County's long-time residents seemed to be negative in relation to the growth, at least to the kind of growth that was being experienced.

According to the Community Assessment Profile provided by the Georgia Baptist Convention, Beulah finds itself in a position of great opportunity. Current population estimates for the area within 20 minutes of the church suggest more than 232,000 residents living in 81,500 homes. This number has more than doubled in the past 20 years. Of this growing population, 88% are persons who live in a family setting. It is estimated that 80% of the citizens, 185,639 people, do not attend church regularly (Community Assessment Profile: GBC).

Race is also a factor in the future growth of this community. Therefore, ethnicity must be a significant point of interest in Beulah's efforts to reach out. Inside a 10-mile radius of the church, the expected race ratio is expected to change dramatically over the next 5 years. Currently, the ratio stands at 49% Caucasian, 37% African American, and 7% Hispanic. The experts anticipate a dramatic demographic shift by 2012, which would bring those numbers to 41% Caucasian, 42% African American, and

8% Hispanic (Community Assessment Profile: GBC). Any effort to reach out to Beulah's community must include deliberate adjustments to previous strategies.

The largest generational percentage of householders is the population between 35 and 45 years old. The majority of households own 3 vehicles and possess a high school diploma. Another 56% have at least attended college, with 33% having earned a college degree at some level. The median household income for this same area is approximately $58,956. About 47% of households have children, but only 30% of the total homes have married couples with children (Community Assessment Profile: GBC).

The MOSAIC Lifestyle Report separates the population of Douglas County into 60 unique people groups. This quickly reveals the stark diversity of this ministry field. Middle class diversity and multicultural explosion, combined with rapid metropolitan expansion, promises a challenging transformation for the future of this community.

**Beulah Baptist Church**

**Historical background**. Beulah Baptist Church, founded almost 140 years ago, has been a cornerstone of the community since its inception. The congregation's rich heritage remains a significant factor to the small core community who were residents prior to the rapid population growth. The church has been marked with a reputation of consistency and faithfulness. Spontaneous cultural shifts have never greatly influenced this congregation. Drastic change seems to have been neither rejected nor promoted by the leaders or people.

As the church has grown the staff has been forced to grow as well. As recent as 1995, the church staff consisted of the Senior Pastor and two additional people. Today, Beulah employs 14 people for the work of ministry, including the Pastor, Music Minister,

Evangelism Minister, Church Administrator, Directors of Education, Youth, and Children's Ministries. The needs have changed, and the church has made proper adjustments when necessary.

**Statistical church analysis.** Over the past few decades Beulah has enjoyed a consistent pattern of growth, but the annual rate of increase has more than doubled in the last few years. The average number of baptisms increased from 24 in 2005 to 70 in 2011. Since 2006, Beulah has expanded both its home base and global mission. Church membership has grown from 1,132 in 2005 to over 1,550 in 2011, while more than 150 members participated in a short term mission trip in 2011 (Church Trend Profile for Beulah Baptist Church, 2003-2007: GBC).

The physical growth of the congregation has been accompanied by an unprecedented financial budget increase. This is due in part to the initiation of a building fund, which began in November of 2006. The general budget offering has grown from $667,000 in 2005 to $910,000 2011. Another $1.7 million has been given in the past three years toward the construction of a new Worship Center, which was completed in May, 2010.

God has truly blessed the church in these areas, but all reports are not as positive. While reviewing the annual church profile of Beulah Baptist Church, one troubling statistic stands out to any honest observer. While small group enrollment grew by 36% from 2006 to 2009 (688 to 937), small group average attendance only grew by 16% in the same time frame (300 to 348). Corporate worship attendance realized a larger increase during this time than did the educational ministries, realizing a 28% rise (350 to 450).

Congregational worship was relocated to the Family Life Center in May of 2006, and a new Worship Center constructed in May of 2010. Continual growth has taken place as God has brought the increase. It seems, however, that many have fallen through the educational cracks in Beulah's ecclesiastical floor. The church leadership recognizes that evangelism and church growth must never sacrifice long-term discipleship. In fact, one would argue the inseparable relationship of discipleship and biblical evangelism (Matt 28:19-20).

**Ecclesiastical heartbeat.** Beulah is rooted in conservative theology, having been exposed to clear preaching of truth for decades. This congregation is unapologetic in its belief in biblical authority and Messianic exclusivity. There is no debate among the body related to essential theological norms. Because of growth, however, there is an increased diversity among the membership in relation to denominational background. This seems to have brought joy to the body, recognizing the unique characteristics each person now brings to the table of service.

Part of the imperative nature of Beulah Baptist Church is family unity. The people truly do consider themselves a family, recognizing the contributions and benefits each member of the body brings to the arena. While the church focuses on and strives for unity, it has not fallen into the trap of uniformity. The congregation is best described as "unity in diversity."

Beulah has recently acquired a newfound passion for missions. Though historically faithful to the Cooperative Program, giving over 10.5% for more than a decade, money had been the extent of their mission's reach until 2006. For the past three years, however, the church has sent an average of 50 members to China, Honduras, Peru, Russia, and Alaska. These short-term efforts have become part of the Beulah DNA. The

people are now passionately invested in giving to and going on missions. They see the need to become an Acts 1:8 church.

**Church polity.** From its early beginnings until the mid 1980s, Beulah evolved into a Deacon Board and Committee run church. However, this profile quickly changed as a transformative pastor came onto the scene. The church underwent a radical transition under his leadership. Some establishment laymen, who had previously dominated the decision-making process of the church, chose to leave because of the strong leadership of this young pastor. Though only 33, he built a remarkable rapport with the people, who continue to love him 26 years later. This influential man remained pastor for more than 22 years, removing many barriers and creating an environment for true leadership as opposed to individual dominance of special interests.

Some would classify Beulah's traditional church polity as pastor-run, though it seems to be better described as pastor-led. Danny Akin refers to this style of polity as the "single-elder model" (Brand 1975, 25-74). Beulah's deacons function primarily as servants, while committees handle essential business matters. Ultimately, the congregation has the final say in all major matters related to church business. The new pastor is currently attempting to transition the congregation to a form of team ministry, which will enable the people to be more involved in the process of ministry.

The people of Beulah have an obvious willingness to follow godly leadership, though they do not do so blindly. The people desire to have a voice in the process and want to influence decisions. Still, the congregation recognizes the imperative for pastoral leadership for a church to function effectively.

Upon a new pastor's arrival at Beulah, the people immediately began to transfer the respect for and authority given to the former pastor to their new shepherd.

The new pastor came in 2006. Like his predecessor, this pastor was 33 years old. His leadership style differs slightly from the former pastor, which has been somewhat challenging because of the congregation's high expectations in reference to leadership. A gradual leadership adjustment has taken place during the past five years. This change has included a transfer of power from the Senior Pastor to a team of staff members. Likewise, ministry teams have been formed, and people are being empowered to use their gifts in service to the glory of God.

## Rationale

A stronger foundation of discipleship and community through the small groups was needed at Beulah Baptist Church, and the writer believed the ministry would benefit from this project. Four major areas of concern were addressed. First, the ratio between worship service attendees and small group participants was disproportionate. Only seven of every ten worshipers (70%) were connected to a small group in the church.

The second concern involved the timing of this project. The influx of new members into the Beulah Church fellowship has further broadened the ratio between small group attendance and worship attendance over the past four years, establishing a dangerous and unhealthy pattern. The difference in these two groups should be low, but the growth trends pointed toward a potential widening of this 30% gap. If efforts to correct the problem were not made, the problem would likely have grown worse in time as the church continued to expand.

The third concern involved a potential ignorance of discipleship development among the congregation. Most attendees were unaware of the benefits and purposes of small group ministry in the life of a believer. A major hope for this project was to see every believer at Beulah Baptist Church move toward a stronger personal commitment to

Christ through participation in a small group. In order for this goal to become a reality, men and women had to recognize the general benefits of small groups; they needed to admit their own personal need for these ministries. Commitment was required to make small groups a priority in their lives.

The final concern involved the future of the congregation. This project impacted every aspect of the church's life. The intended result of this project was more than a mere increase in attendance. When people are connected to small groups, the body of Christ becomes healthier, experiencing an uncommon spiritual vitality. Spiritual growth increases as a result of their study of the Bible, and fellowship with other believers becomes a priority in the lives of believers.

As the body grows in Christ, individual disciples will be more likely to be in tune with the corporate vision and mission of the church, and future leaders will learn to discover, develop, and deploy their gifts as God prepares them for the ministry work of tomorrow. The future ministry structure and function of Beulah Baptist Church depends on a successful small group ministry. Much of the church's vision and mission will be implemented through these small groups, and ultimate spiritual health can most likely be achieved through this vehicle. That is why this was an essential project for this time in the life of the congregation.

## Definitions and Limitations

### Definitions

*Small groups*. Churches have a history of using countless names and structures for their small group ministries. Beulah Baptist Church has traditionally referred to small groups as "Sunday School classes," but the name was changed to "Open Groups" just three years ago. Some continue to call them by the old name, and this has caused some

confusion over time. Plans are in place to transition to a more permanent name for the small group ministry. "Life Groups" will be introduced to the church during the process of this project, but for the purposes of writing, the generic term "small groups" will be used as well.

**Limitations**

As with any effort, the findings of this project may not ensure permanent or even lasting success. One must recognize the need for permanent lifestyle changes in order to realize a long-term transformation. Spiritual renewal cannot be fully measured by this project alone. Steps must be taken to reinforce the benefits of this effort, or participants will likely slip back into their previous routine.

While immediate benefits of this project were experienced, the long-term effects are difficult to determine. This 8-week effort will make a substantial impact, but stated principles must be applied continually for future success. The results of this project were exclusively related to Beulah Baptist Church. The application of this project, however, will be helpful to any church that finds itself in a similar context of ministry. Results vary depending on the effectiveness and organization of the process.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Research Methodology</h3>

Successful completion of this project was defined by meeting the three goals as previously set by this writer. These goals were to teach knowledge, change attitudes, and provoke action from the attendees of the Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia. This effort included a pre-project survey taken by a diverse test group of adult members, a 60-day church-wide campaign led by the pastor and leadership team, an 8-week data

collection period, and a final statistical analysis of the data collected throughout the selected period.

**The Pre-Project Survey**

The pre-project survey provided a foundational understanding of the congregation's knowledge and attitude toward the small group ministry of the church. This survey was given to a test group randomly selected from among the worship attendance. The survey included questions regarding people's opinions of their small group's effectiveness, including ministry, teaching, fellowship, and outreach. The survey was based on a five-mark Likert Scale, providing choices from "Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree" (see Appendix 1).

**The Campaign**

A leadership team was organized consisting of the staff and small group leadership. This team assisted the Pastor and Director of Education in efforts to promote an intentional and organized motivation of the laity to become more faithful. In addition, daily devotionals were published by the church staff, providing small group participants with daily reminders of the spiritual benefits of L.I.F.E. Groups throughout the campaign.

The church staff devoted an entire month to an emphasis on small group ministry. Detailed statistical facts were shared with the entire congregation, revealing the unhealthy pattern of past progression. The pastor devoted four Sunday morning sermons to the communication of the biblical foundations of the small group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church. The Leadership Team planned these services, hoping to maximize every opportunity to communicate these essential truths.

**The Data Collection
and Statistical Analysis**

Beulah Baptist Church used ACS Technologies as a provider of church

computer software for more than 10 years. This software maintained a detailed record of

all members, including their giving and attendance history. The data collected over the

2010 and 2011 church years was used to compare the same designated three-month

period of time. The contrast was not drawn by attendance comparisons alone. Rather, the

documented percentage of specific attendee regularity from three separate years was

compared. In other words, comparisons were made between various years of the same

individual's attendance record.

This collection process divided the attendees of Beulah's small groups into

four basic sections for purposes of analysis. These categories are: A, B, C, and D. Group

"A" referred to those who participated in small groups more than 83% of the time. Group

"B" represented individuals that attended 67% to 82% of small group sessions. Those

who came 51% to 66% of the time were considered group "C," while anyone with a

record under 50% was deemed a member of group "D."

The data collection consisted of a 12-week span of time, which immediately

followed the campaign. The leadership team was directed to encourage and motivate the

body during this 12-week time frame. Attendees were regularly reminded of the purpose

and benefits of the small group ministries throughout the duration of this project.

The statistical analysis provided by the ACS software revealed the success or

failure of the staff's effort to increase small group attendance percentage from among all

categories of church attendees. The focus of the analysis was on the percentages of the

various categories. The hope was to see the top three categories grow in percentage

collectively, while the disconnected category (D) was reduced in size. The designated

2011 test quarter (12 weeks) was compared to the 2009, and 2010 equivalents, revealing if Beulah's people were moved to action.

**The Post-Project Surveys**

Finally, a post-project survey was conducted among the same test-group as before. This final evaluation unveiled the level of gained knowledge and the extent of changed attitudes toward the small group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church. Comparisons were made to determine if an attitudinal change has taken place during the process of the campaign. Pre-campaign perceptions of small groups were compared to the post-campaign perceptions of the same test group.

Attendee awareness of small group health and purpose were tested as well. The participants' understanding of small groups was examined at both stages, revealing the success or failure of the intended goal of the project. A second group of newer members was also surveyed several months after the campaign had ended. This additional pool of 67 new members was questioned in hopes of discovering any additional insights from a newer member's perspective.

## Conclusion: A Welcomed Renewal of Small Groups

While the history of Beulah Baptist Church promotes a rich heritage of conservative theology and evangelistic ministry, the timing is perfect to refocus attention toward the fundamentals of small group ministry. This project initiated a process of increasing commitment, promoting community, and equipping disciples.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Every generation and culture possesses traditions they consider essential, but the customs of men are only temporary. Scripture, however, provides its readers with eternal principles that are applicable to life in every age and society. Two such biblical constants related to small group ministry are community and discipleship among the people of God. While many additional points could be discussed, these two will provide a sufficient biblical foundation for the ministry improvements suggested for Beulah Baptist Church in this project.

**Foundations for Biblical Community**

The first matter for consideration is the concept of biblical community. "Scripture begins and ends with God calling humanity into relationship with the divine community and with one another" (Icenogle 1994, 20). From the beginning of humanity, to the prophecies yet fulfilled, Scripture remains consistent in its message of community (Grenz 1994, 147-48). Only a redeemed people can find true biblical community, "living within a renewed creation, and enjoying the presence of God" (Grenz 1994, 148).

Both the Old and New Testaments present a constant thread of community among God's people (Anderson 1975, 13). Regardless of the age or circumstance, the Creator possesses a redemptive plan to bring His fallen creation back

into a unified community for His own purpose and glory (Brueggemann 1982, 13). As has been His character and theme throughout human history, God "now calls us into a community of justice and fellowship" (Janzen 1997, 159). This section examines the biblical and theological characteristics of community, giving particular attention to divine covenant.

**Covenant Community
in the Old Testament**

      **The foundation for community.** The most foundational example of community is the existence of the triune God, the Creator of all things. While God is one, He is realized in three persons, each equally central yet collectively related to the others (Grenz 1994, 85). "The Father, Son, and Spirit are the social Trinity" (Grenz 1994, 99).

> The Father intends that creation share in his existence and enter into the relationship the Son enjoys with him…. We may summarize God's intention for the world by employing the term "community." Just as the triune God is the eternal fellowship of the Trinitarian members, so also God's purpose for creation is that the world participate in "community." (Grenz 1994, 147)

      Though foundation for community is found in the Trinity, God further established His communal plan in His act of creation (Grenz 1994, 183). While all of creation exists for His pleasure (Prov 16:4), God is a relational being, and He desires to have an intimate relationship with mankind (Grenz 1994, 183). Humans were created for community with God.

      Adam and Eve were created with an intended design for companionship. God's plan for community can be seen in His design of gender distinction, the innate potential for procreation (Von Rad 1956, 58). God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:18). God never desired for humans to live lives of isolation; human beings were created to live as image-bearers (Gen 1:27) in

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purposed community, glorifying the Creator through obedience to His commands (Stuart 2006, 37). Humans were made for community with one another.

> God's ultimate intension is not directed to a transpositioning of the individual believer to an isolated, individual realm of unending "eternal life" beyond the world and time. Rather, God's program focuses on the corporate human story and therefore on humans as potential participants in a new society in the future. In fact, Scripture consistently presents our eternal home in social, rather than individual terms. (Grenz 1994, 150)

The Creator established a means for personal relationship with His creation and subsequent community with one another (Gen 2:15-17), but Adam ruined that relationship in the Garden of Eden (Rom 5:12). Mankind began a path of spiritual degeneration and degradation, resulting in a community of chaos and corruption (Von Rad 1952, 127).

As a result, Icenogle explains, "all human communities exist in a state of brokenness and ambivalence…. Sin is the failure and destruction of human community…. Sin is the inability of humanity to enter into community with the God of community" (Icenogle 1994, 27). Consequently, Adam's sin brought judgment and subsequent condemnation upon the entire human race for all time (Rom 5:16).

**Covenant, the hope of broken community.** Because of man's depravity and resulting broken community, a divine covenant was needed to bring restoration to man's relationship with God. The word covenant, found many times in English translations of the Old Testament, is a challenging word to define. In fact, the full meaning of its Hebrew form (*berit)* can only be determined by its contextual usage (Busenitz 1999, 175). The Old Testament contains 265 uses of the word "covenant," each carrying the idea of assurance or obligation (Smith 1993, 147).

These Scripture references may be divided into two major categories of covenants: conditional and unconditional (Lawrence 2010, 57-58). In a conditional covenant two parties made an agreement with mutual commitments. A conditional covenant was dependent upon both parties fulfilling their particular responsibilities. Political treaties were one type of conditional covenant in the ancient Near East (Busenitz 1999,176). Two important dynamics were found in these governmental treaties: protection and allegiance. A strong king promised protection to a weaker king, and the weaker king committed absolute allegiance to the stronger ruler (Webber 1993, 56). God's covenant with Moses is an example of a conditional covenant in the Old Testament (Exod 24).

In contrast, an unconditional covenant placed no stipulations on the recipients of the promise. Examples of this form of covenant include the Noahic (Genesis 9), Abrahamic (Gen 15), and Davidic Covenants (2 Sam 7). In such covenants, the superior guarantor made an agreement "to or for, not with, the subordinate," making this purely a one-sided agreement (Busenitz 1999, 176). "The great king simply staked himself, his word, and his resources as guarantor of the covenant blessings" (Lawrence 2010, 57-58). This was truly a covenant of grace.

**Grace through covenant.** Though the word "covenant" is not used until Gen 6:18, the covenant concept can be seen as early as Genesis 2:16-17, when God gave Adam and Eve clear instructions in the Garden of Eden. All of mankind sinned in Adam when he failed to obey God's commands (Gen 3:6; Rom 5:12).

The depravity of mankind increased from Adam to Noah (Gen 6:5), further widening the gap of damaged community. The sins of mankind escalated to the point of unprecedented divine judgment in the form of a worldwide flood in Genesis 7 (Scullion

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1994, 422). Nevertheless, God did not abandon His creation, nor did He forsake His redemptive plan (Von Rad 1956, 129). After the flood (Gen 9:9-10) God made an unconditional covenant with Noah, his descendants, and every living creature (Smith 1993, 151). In this covenant, God promised never again to destroy the earth by flood (Gen 9:11). God provided mankind with a clean slate and the potential to restore community with the Father. "Judgment is postponed until redemption is fully accomplished" (Lawrence 2010, 59).

Though God's covenant with Noah renewed His creation, His plan of redemption continued to unfold. Consequently, while the covenant with Noah made future existence possible for mankind, another covenant was needed to re-establish the relationship marred by Adam in the beginning (Von Rad 1956, 130).

God chose to establish this covenant through Abram. This was based on unrestricted grace and included a promise of descendants and a dwelling place, the establishment of God's covenant community (Gen 15:1-21). God's only requirement of Abram was to go where He led him (Smith 1993, 153). "In the Abrahamic Covenant, God demonstrated His unmerited favor and unilateral choice of Israel as 'the apple of His eye,' a special people called out from among the nations through whom the Messiah would come" (Busenitz 1999, 182).

Following the unconditional blessings on the descendants of Abraham, Israel received a subsequent conditional promise from God through Moses (Exod 20-25). This covenant with Moses was made as "an extension or a fulfillment" of God's promise to Abraham (Smith 1993, 155). As a result, the children of Israel had the overwhelming opportunity to live in community with God as He dwelt among His people (Janzen 1997, 158). Obedience to the covenant ensured possession of the Promised Land; however,

disobedience would lead to the rejection by the Father. The protective hand of the King would be removed, and exile would be the inevitable fate of rebellious Israel (Webber 1993, 64). Knowing Israel's inability to meet the divine standard, God further made provision for community through a covenant with King David.

With anticipation of the coming Messiah and the establishment of His eternal community of promise, God established a covenant with King David (2 Sam 7:16). By this action, God provided David's descendants a guarantee to the throne forever (Anderson 1975, 312). David rightly recognized God's grace in this covenant, declaring his own lack of merit and his incapability of accomplishing the given task (2 Sam 7:18). God again expressed His exceptional desire to preserve Israel as His own special covenant people (2 Sam 7:23-24).

**Covenant community and lordship.** Through the seed of King David, the Father would liberate His people forever. Still, spiritual freedom is never without divine control; though partakers of a community of grace, Israel continued to fall short of God's standard. The sins of the people were a "violation of communion, the betrayal of God's love, and a revolt against His lordship" (Smith 1993, 277). Yahweh's provision is sufficient for a community of grace, but community requires lordship (Smith 1993, 165).

As a natural branch depends upon a vine for life, so were individuals in the community dependent upon their connectedness to Yahweh. Israel was connected to God by the covenant, and true repentance was the only remedy for their shameful rebellion (MacDonald 2005, 88). "Though God planted Israel as a choice vine, it has become a wild vine, bearing obnoxious fruit and sour wine…. This has been Israel's choice, not God's" (Fretheim 2002, 69).

A seemingly incongruous relationship between shepherd and vine illustrates the strained relationship between God and His people (Ps 80:8-13). The Shepherd (Yahweh) planted the vine (Israel) in fertile soil, but the fruit of the vine had spoiled (Schaefer 2001, 198). Furthermore, degenerate Israel was depicted as the faithless bride and the fruitless vineyard (Isa 5:1-7). As a result of Israel's disobedience, the Shepherd's protective hedge was removed, thus again, thwarting their community with the Father (Kaiser 1972, 61).

**An everlasting covenant.** As the people continued in their lawlessness, the prophet Isaiah warned that mankind had defiled the earth, and Israel's land would soon be empty and plundered. God's judgment was on His people because of their transgression of the law, the altering of His ordinances, and for breaking His covenant (Isa 24:3-5), but this punishment would be realized by the whole human race. The word translated "the land" (ארץ) in verse 3, is equivalent to the New Testament idea of the *kosmos* (Keil 1983, 426-27). Isaiah spoke straight to the rulers of Israel, accusing them of making a covenant with death and Hell (Isa 28:15), but in verse 18 God declared that this covenant of death would be annulled or struck out. The people of God would now experience the judgment of God (Keil 1983, 13).

Still, repentance and restoration were always available to God's people (Isa 42:6). Despite Israel's rebellious actions, Jehovah declared a new covenant through His chosen Servant. The "Servant" mentioned in Isaiah 42:1 is later referred to by the prophet Malachi as the "messenger of the covenant" (Mal 3:1). This messianic figure would serve as mediator of a covenant with Israel, a light to the heathen Gentiles, and a bridge to a new fellowship between God and His people (Keil 1983, 180).

The new covenant is radically different from the covenant God made with their fathers (Jer 31:32). This covenant will last forever (Jer 32:40 and Ezek 16:60). Irvin A. Busenitz, a respected theologian, points out, "In the New Covenant, God evidenced anew His continual pouring out of grace, a promise through which He would put His law within His people, writing it on their hearts" (Busenitz 1999, 182). The internal inscription of the Law on man's heart (Jer 31:33) stands in stark contrast to the external presentation of the Law on stone tablets by Moses (Holladay 1989, 165). Though the Mosaic Covenant was based on strict obedience to the Law, the New Covenant would be dependent upon God's undeserved forgiveness of man's sin (Keil 1950, 39).

Though mankind consistently failed in his efforts to meet the standard of holiness, the Old Testament prophets offered hope in a promise of a new covenant. The Hebrew word for covenant, ברית (*berit*), is translated διαθηκη (*diatheke*) in the Septuagint (LXX) (Orr 1939, 729). Every use of the word finds the salvific purpose of God's grace (Busenitz 1999, 177); but the previous covenants found in the Old Testament were all temporary in application. This New Covenant, however, fulfilled all the previous covenants and made an unprecedented everlasting claim (Holladay 1989, 165). Yahweh promised to be Israel's God forever, offering everlasting community with Him. They, in turn, would be His own special people (Keil 1950, 39).

**Covenant and sacrifice.** While God desired a special relationship with His people, His holiness could not allow Him to look upon sin. God's holiness exposed man's utter failure, but this holiness also provided man with the ability to overcome his problem of sin (Smith 1993, 170). Therefore, for community to exist, sacrifice had to be made and sins forgiven (Smith 1993, 148-49).

Kings in the Old Testament would cut a covenant (Lawrence 2010, 57). The covenant was established as the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the people of God (Exod 24:8). It was at this moment that the people of Abraham, and subsequently Moses, exclusively became the people of Yahweh (Webber 1993, 59). The word atonement is key to one's understanding of sacrifice. It literally means "a making at one," emphasizing the restorative process of estranged mankind to unity in the community of Yahweh (Smith 1993, 301).

Two distinct themes are present in the Mosaic Covenant found in Exodus 20-25, relationship and responsibility (Stuart 2006, 552). The covenant relationship was established by the sacrifice of an animal, including the sharing of a communal meal (Exod 24:9-11). Benefits of this relationship included divine provision and protection. In return, the people of God committed to present an undivided loyalty in worship (Webber 1993, 57-59). The covenant was not established to save God's people; it was a renewal of an ongoing relationship between God and His people (Barrick 1999, 226).

> It is obvious that the covenant was not to be the means of salvation. Participants in the covenant at Sinai were already worshipers of Yahweh. The works specified in the covenant's stipulations were never designed to bring anyone into a salvific relationship to God. The stipulations were designed to enhance the believer's worship and service. Obedience to the laws of Moses would bring blessings to God's people, but not salvation from sin (cf. Rom 3:20). Indeed, the worship at Sinai was motivated by a salvation that had already been experienced. (Barrick 1999, 219)

Sacrifice was a major part of the covenantal responsibility of the Jews; each offering possessed its own significant meaning and purpose. The peace offering emphasized the development of a communal relationship between God and man (Webber 1993, 57). In this offering, men both gave a gift to God and enjoyed fellowship with God. Those in covenant with God did not lose their gifts at the peace offering; they gained God's favor through communion with Him (Webber 1993, 57).

**Covenant Community
in the New Testament**

**The promised Messiah.** The coming of Israel's Messiah, and thus the

establishment of the eternal community through the New Covenant, was foretold many

times in the Old Testament, but this promise was finally realized in the New Testament

through Jesus of Nazareth. The prophecies of His birthplace (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:1), His

virgin birth (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:21-23), His rejection by the Jews (Ps 118:22; 1 Pet 2:7), and

His humiliating death (Isa 53; John 1:10-11; 7:5, 48) all found reality in the life of Jesus

Christ.

By His own testimony, Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the Messianic

promises found in the Old Testament (Luke 4:16; John 4:25-26). The apostles further

recognized Jesus as the cornerstone of their faith, the promised deliverer (Matt 16:16;

John 1:41; 1 Pet 2:7). New Testament covenant community finds its legitimacy in the

Messiah, both man's perfect priest and sufficient sacrifice (Ladd 1974, 626).

**The sufficient sacrifice.** Sin had long prevented fellowship between God and

man, but the Creator/Redeemer continued His relentless pursuit of man. The previous

covenants had only provided a constant reminder of man's depravity, and the blood of

animals was found insufficient to accomplish the task of reconciliation (Moffatt 1979,

136). With the New Covenant Jesus Christ brought and became a "better sacrifice" (Ladd

1974, 629), validating this New Covenant in His blood (Mark 14:24).

> For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of
> the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year
> by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to
> be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more
> consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.
> For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away
> sins…previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for
> sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them " (which are offered according to

the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb 10:1-10)

Though the old covenant could not provide a sufficient sacrifice, it served as a foreshadowing (Bruce 1990, 235) of things to come through a new and better covenant (Heb 10:1). Christ provided a new kind of spiritual community that would lead His followers toward true holiness (Brueggemann 1982, 34). The new covenant was based entirely on the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19). Salvation was not received because of obedience required but grace received (Eph 2:8). What the Old Covenant required of men the New Covenant supplied to men (Keil 1950, 39).

Yahweh's promise of a better covenant (Jeremiah 31:32) through the prophet Jeremiah was realized when Christ became both the surety (Hebrews 7:22) and the Mediator (Hebrews 8:6) of this new unconditional covenant of grace, providing a newfound confidence in the sufficiency of the blood sacrifice and supremacy of the High Priest (Bruce 1985, 7-8).

**The true vine.** Through His words in John 15, Jesus brings to life the Old Testament concept of the vine. References to the vine in the Old Testament clearly speak of the nation of Israel, a degenerate vine unable to save its people (Fretheim 2002, 69). Those connected to this unfruitful vine were undeniably dependent on an insufficient covenant. Therefore, when the Father established a New Covenant, He subsequently supplied the True Vine (Morris 1995, 593).

While the old vine, Israel, brought shame upon the people of God, connection to the True Vine, Christ Jesus, brought forgiveness of sin through His New Covenant (Fretheim 2002, 442). The Greek word for abide, μένω *(menō),* is used ten times in John 15:4-10. This word might be translated "remain," but it carries a much deeper meaning

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than an object staying in one location. The context implies a believer remaining in Christ

continually, resulting in an "unbroken fellowship and personal communion with Him"

(Harris 1986c, 412-15). Christ provided a new solution for mankind's old problem with

the covenant (Brown 1970, 660-61).

**Lordship and community.** If the people of God are hopeless without the New

Covenant, they are also powerless without the True Vine. God's covenant with the old

vine, Israel, was somewhat dependent on the obedience of men, but the True Vine is

Christ the Messiah who provides the power necessary to keep God's commands (Bernard

1929, 481). One's abiding in the Son is inseparable from his acknowledgment of Jesus as

Lord.

The True Vine gave Christ's followers power to live in holy community with

God and His covenant people (Morris 1995, 595-96). "The branches cannot bear fruit of

themselves, but receive their strength and sap from the vine. The believer is not a self-

determined person, but one who is always receiving anew, who lays claim to nothing as

his or her own accomplishment…. We as Christians can do nothing without him"

(Haenchen 1984, 131). This covenant community is now formed by the common

commitment and personal confession of every member of the body to the Lordship of

Christ (Grenz 1994, 625).

**God's love and community.** Christ further clarified His offer of blessing by

explaining His expectation of communal love (John 15:12), reminding His disciples of a

previous challenge. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I

have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My

disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Mutual compassion among

the disciples served as verification of their love for the Father. Conversely, the disciples' love for one another served as the summation of God's righteous expectations of His followers (Morris 1995, 598).

How can Christians discover the power to obey the Father? "Our holy obedience can be nothing more or less than a worshipful response to God's wooing us to Himself" (Peterson 2005, 2). A believer's fellowship with the Father brings supernatural empowerment to accomplish His will. A Christian can only show the love of God to others when he has communed with God; equally, man cannot commune with God if he refuses to show God's love to others (Morris 1995, 597).

By obeying the Father's commands, the early church displayed communal holiness, which strengthened their testimonies of faith among unbelievers (Webber 1993, 62). Still, "the church is far more than a collection of saved individuals who band together for the task of winning the lost. The church is the community of salvation" (Grenz 1994, 627).

**Power for obedience.** While Christ has empowered the covenant community for obedience, satanic forces will always fight against this fellowship. "Community flows out of the very nature and presence of a covenant God, a God who convenes people into healing and intimate relationships" with one another (Icenogle 1994, 33). Still, humanity is continually moving in a counter-covenant direction of chaos and brokenness. Satan is ever seeking to deceive and distract the church from her holy mission (1 Pet 5:8).

Man alone could not accomplish the New Covenant requirement of obedience. Therefore, the "Helper" or "Comforter," παράκλητος (*paraklētos*) found in John 15:26, was sent to empower the disciples for obedience (Bernard 1929, 484). Jesus explained the benefit of the Helper's coming, stating that it was better for His disciples that He would

go away so the Comforter could come (John 16:7). The Spirit would empower this new community by His love. "The obedience which believers render Him is not so much the cause of His continuing His love towards them as the effect of His love" (Torrance 1961, 98).

Obedience became the end of, not the means to salvation. Jesus declared, in John 15:16, that His followers were chosen and appointed for this very purpose, "that you should go and bear fruit" (Morris 1995, 600). The Spirit, therefore, progressively grows the believer for the purpose of obedience (Schreiner 2003, 54), but this fruit only comes from a proper fellowship with the Spirit. A Christian can only win the battle between flesh and Spirit when he "walks in" and is "led by the Spirit," in community with God (George 1994, 386).

**The early church community.** The Greek word ἐκκλησία *(ekklesia)* is used many times in reference to the New Testament church. "This term arises from a verb *kaleo* ('to call') plus the preposition *ek* ('out of').… The New Testament employment of *ekklesia* provides an important link between the church of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament nation of Israel" (Grenz 1994, 605). Jesus Himself declared that the church belonged to Him alone. "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18).

While God calls the sinner individually to salvation, He also calls the church corporately to His mission. Scriptural instruction is directed toward a community of faith, referring to this corporate body as "the house of God" (Heb 10:21) and "the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27). He encourages the community to "draw near in faith," to "hold fast without wavering" (Heb 10:22-23). He explains how this might be accomplished. The people of God must "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not

forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another" (Heb 10:24-25).

The body of Christ, the church, is a community of unworthy sinners who have individually recognized their depravity and have surrendered personal pride in repentance (Moffatt 1979, 139). Christian community is much stronger than racial ethnicity, familial ancestry, or physical geography. Christ has broken through those barriers that restricted other human associations (Gal 3:28). This is the true family of God born in the blood of the Lamb and lived out by the power of the Spirit (Gal 5:16).

People have consistently misunderstood the biblical concept of the "church." Christ's church is not merely a building or institution. Instead, the church, like the covenant people of God in the Old Testament, are "a special people, a people who see themselves as standing in relationship to the God who saves them and to each other as those who share in this salvation" (Grenz 1994, 605). The Body of Christ is a group of believers who have collectively entered into covenant with God and now constitute the community of God (Grenz 1994, 624-25).

**The ordinances and community.** Though love was expressed between the individual believers in the body, the collective faith community experienced an intimate fellowship with the Creator through acts of commitment that serve as "symbols of the gospel" (Grenz 1994, 677). These ordinances, baptism and communion, "constitute fitting vehicles for expressing our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ" (Grenz 1994, 677).

Where circumcision was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant, baptism is the sign and seal of the New Covenant, signifying that a believer has experienced salvific union with the Redeemer (Grenz 1994, 612). God established baptism as the mark of

discipleship and belonging. Though not necessary for spiritual regeneration, water

baptism is not merely inconsequential. This ordinance is considered the natural response

to God's realized grace, serving as the ordered entry into community with the body of

Christ, the church (Schreiner 2006, 1 and 122).

While baptism provides an arena for the public testimony of an individual's

conversion, it also solidifies the corporate theology of the collective community of faith.

Immersion is not only an act of individual obedience; it is also a corporate act of identity.

Baptism is a public testimony of the corporate body of Christ, clear evidence to the world

that this group of people is, in fact, the church of Jesus Christ (Schreiner 2006, 3).

While baptism is the mark of justification validating an individual's public

initiation into Christ's faith community, observance of the Lord's Supper/Communion is

the testimony of one's sustained fellowship with the body of Christ. "In the New

Testament the Last Supper is a ceremony renewing the covenant" (Scott 1995, 327). The

biblical scene found in Matthew 26:28 reveals Jesus' adamant claim that His shed blood

was, in fact, "the blood of the new covenant," which provided forgiveness of sin once for

all (Heb 10:10).

Communion is a corporate practice that illustrates the community found

through His blood. In the Lord's Supper, a "participatory assembly" convenes in a spirit

of unity and accountability to worship the risen Savior (Adewuya 2007, 107). Though

scripture never validates a view of transubstantiation, Christians do experience an

undeniable oneness in the observance of the Lord's Supper, which unites them in the

promises of God and the riches of the gospel (Erickson 1998, 1127).

The ordinances of baptism and communion exist only in and by the community

of God. The true meaning of these "acts of commitment" is most significant to the

corporate body of Christ. "Through these symbols we reenact our death and resurrection with Christ. Thereby the Spirit vividly reminds us of our union with Christ and confirms in us our identity as new persons in Christ" (Grenz 1994, 674).

As in the Old Testament peace offering, believers now enjoy a newfound fellowship with the Father and with one another because of the their relationship to the perfect High Priest, Jesus Christ (Bruce 1990, 241). This provides a deeper understanding of New Testament communion and community (1 John 1:3). Those who walk in the light of Christ share a fellowship that is undeniably connected to the blood of Jesus. Christian community cannot be separated from the Christ of community (1 John 1:7).

**Fellowship and community.** Though faced with many internal and external challenges, the early church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, demonstrated Christ's love immediately following His ascension. They formed a communal association that served as the solution to all potential barriers, such as poverty, loneliness, persecution, and suffering (Polhill 1992, 119). Believers displayed an obvious divine fellowship, κοινωνία *(koinōnia),* a communion or partnership that helped them overcome the barriers that would prevent the advancement of the gospel message (Fitzmyer 1998, 270).

The post-ascension disciples of Christ soon displayed a newfound form of community, a voluntary sharing of possessions, born in their divine love for one another. This social shift was rooted in the special circumstances of the day (Ironside 2007, 43-44). Christ had departed, but the Spirit, the Helper, had arrived. This extreme example of community is a beautiful picture of how God's love motivates believers to consider others before themselves (Polhill 1992, 152).

It is important to note that Luke's presentation of the early church community is more descriptive than prescriptive in nature. His goal was not to mandate a standard for

organizational church practice. Instead, he describes the unique practices of the infant church (Conzelmann 1987, 24). The book of Acts in essence provides a history of early church community. Luke attempts to describe the circumstances and results of what happened during these days. "The narrator is not merely idealistic; he is attempting to portray the immediate crystallization of a large and smoothly functioning community" (Pervo 2009, 93).

Though not a prescriptive rule for all time, the radical events of Acts 2 were not isolated experiences. This practice of sharing was the new normal for the early church (Polhill 1992, 119). Though the duration of the practice is not known, a second such example of community sharing is found in Acts 4:32-35. This text describes a scene where those who had much, supported those who had little or nothing. People saw their possessions as being gifts of grace, given for God's kingdom purpose.

Communal sharing was a spontaneous expression of God's love through the fellowship of the Spirit (Kittel 1964, 796). Possessions were God's to use how He saw fit (Pervo 2009, 127). Early church followers of Christ were truly, "of one heart and one soul" (*kardia kai psyche mia*). This expression unites two ideals of friendship: the Greek idea of a shared soul (*mia psyche*) and the Hebrew concept of complete loyalty (Larkin 1995, 81-82).

The common compassion shared by God's people went far beyond the giving of material possessions. The church appointed men solely responsible for the care of widows among the brethren (Ironside 2007, 87). Financial need was not the motivation for the commencement of this ministry. Instead, these servants exemplified the fellowship of the body of Christ by reaching out to those who were hurting (Acts 6:1-7).

Communal sharing is more than the giving of money; it is the giving of self for others. This caring for and sharing with others is an evidence of the Spirit (Polhill 1992, 157).

**The new covenant and the apostles' doctrine.** Another of the diverse manifestations of fellowship in the early church was an emphasis on the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). The community of faith was known for its desire to gather around the Word of God (Polhill 1992, 119). Reminiscent of Israel and Ezra in Nehemiah 7:73 - 8:18, these disciples formed an assembled company for the purpose of hearing the voice of God. The Father's voice was speaking, not exclusively to the individual, but also to the corporate community of believers (Vanhoozer 2005, 128-29).

**Conclusion of biblical community.** The fall of man led to communal brokenness that divine covenant and blood sacrifice alone could renew. The promised Messiah was man's only hope for restored community with God and one another. This covenant community was ultimately found in the early church as they acknowledged the essential lordship of Christ and love for one another. The ordinances of communion and baptism serve as a confession of personal and corporate faith, while the fellowship of the body testifies to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

## Foundations for Biblical Discipleship

Spiritual liberation comes to those who are born into community with Christ. Identity with His covenant requires total surrender of sin and self. One must lose his carnal life in order to find eternal life in Christ (Matt 16:25). The call of discipleship is not merely recognition of Christ's identity; true discipleship requires a deliberate response to His call and fulfillment of His purposes (Alexander 1973, 523).

A foundational understanding of Christian discipleship can be traced all the way back to Hebrew concepts of spiritual training. Church education today might be considered an extension of Jewish education (Orr 1939, 901). Several factors contribute to this assertion, including the involvement of the parents in the educational process and the practice of mentoring. Every generation of God's people has been required to follow His deliberate plan of corporate learning (Orr 1939, 901). Still in every bygone day the revelation of God, not the ability of man, was the key ingredient to their enlightened minds and transformed practices (Jas 1915, 21).

**Discipleship in the Old Testament**

  **Parental education.** Familial training was an all-encompassing process of intentional development of children in Hebrew culture, beginning with Abraham in the patriarchal period. Likewise, Abraham was called to influence and educate his household, including his servants (Gen 18:19). So was every man to teach those under his care, providing direction in the spiritual and practical development of those under his influence (Jas 1915, 24).

  "The family was the social unit and its head the person in whom centered also religious authority and leadership…. Education was a matter of purely domestic interest and concern. The home was the only school and the parents the only teachers" (Orr 1939, 901). The father of a Hebrew family was held accountable for the spiritual development of his whole household, and the spiritual growth of his children would determine his success as the leader.

  Joshua affirmed this concept of familial responsibility by making a clear declaration on behalf of his entire household (Lockerbie 1994, 23): "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh 24:15). The Hebrew people were deliberate in their

efforts to pass the absolute truth of God's message to the next generation (Orr 1939, 901).

Though not an established institution of higher learning, the home served as an

intentional classroom for the balanced development of children.

"The mother was to teach the children while performing her household

duties…. Hebrew fathers considered their responsibility for teaching their children their

most important task" (Reed 1993, 46). Children were trained with an expectation of

permanent impact (Prov 22:6). The family was the centerpiece of religious education in

Hebrew culture, passing the oral traditions down from one generation to another (Orr

1939, 901).

**The law of Moses.** After receipt of the Law from God, the people of Israel

were responsible to read and meditate on it, and in some cases they memorized portions

for personal growth (Wood 1986, 119-120). The emphasis on the Law was not an

abandonment of patriarchal forms of education, but rather, this new approach of training

served as an extension of previous methods.

The importance of the law in Old Testament discipleship cannot be overstated.

It served as an educational curriculum for all Hebrew people. Teaching and learning the

Law was not an optional element of worship for the followers of Yahweh (Anderson

1975, 356). The meaning of the Hebrew word *berit*, most often translated covenant, was

not simply a mutual settlement finalized but an imposition or obligation realized

(Busenitz 1999, 175)**.** "Covenant is the instrument constituting the rule (or kingdom) of

God, and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate

the biblical ideal of religious community" (Freedman 1992, 1179).

While study of the Torah, as a whole, was considered to be most important to

all Jewish learners, the Shema, in particular, was the foundational statement of all Jewish

belief (Weblowsky 1997, 214-15). Jesus Himself quoted the Shema in Mark 12:29, making it the introduction to the Great Commandment. "Israel is to love God in one way: with the unswerving, complete, steadfast loyalty that is the very foundation of the covenant community" (Anderson 1975, 356).

The Shema (Deut 6:4) was considered to be the undisputed foundation for all methods of spiritual training (Reed 1993, 46). Though parents had long practiced spiritual training in the celebration of the Passover (Hamilton 2010, 11), Deuteronomy 6:6 instructed parents to specifically teach "these words" to their children, referring to the Ten Commandments. All citizens of Israel were expected to practice these directives in their homes (The New Interpreter's Bible 1994, 343).

A further examination of Deuteronomy 6:7 reveals more specifics related to God's standard of training the next generation. The masculine singular form of "you" reveals that God has chosen the father as the primary means of this familial education. "It doesn't take a village; it takes a father" (Hamilton 2010, 12). The mothers and daughters are not forgotten. Though not spoken of directly in the text, the obedient father will inevitably expose his entire household to the truth. "The father is the key to the family, and a son is a future father" (Hamilton 2010, 13).

Prayer, another deliberate aspect of Jewish education, included the recitation of specific scriptures such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Numbers 15:37-41. These passages were not only spoken daily, in the morning and at night, but they were required to be committed to memory as well. Deuteronomy 6:7 was written down on parchment and placed inside the phylacteries, which were worn on the arm and head during prayer (Freedman 2000, 1205). Training of the Old Testament believer included very specific and deliberate expectations. The ritualistic practices served as tools of meditation and

memorization that endeavored to bring internal transformation. The call of the Covenant was holiness in obedience (Stuart 2006, 423).

**Schools in Jewish culture.** After the Babylonian captivity, the synagogue became a new factor in education. Following the model of the Babylonians, the Jewish synagogue became the central hub of all religious, social, and educational aspects of life. As a result, education became available in a more corporate setting. Training took a more communal approach as education was organized for the masses (Jas 1915, 42 and 43).

Schools were established for the training of children at various stages of development, providing for a diversity of essentials in education (Moore 1927, 317). Each community trained its children in the synagogue, elementary, and advanced schools. The presence of schools in the community was seen as an obligation of the people (Moore 1927, 317). While these schools taught reading and writing, they also ensured that students were exposed to the Hebrew Bible. "Religious leaders regarded the study of the Scripture as the foundation of all learning" (Moore 1927, 318).

Leading up to the days of Christ, Jews remained intentional in their educational pursuits. "Jewish education superficially followed the same stages as Greco-Roman education" (Ferguson 1993, 102-03), but the content of that teaching was controlled and communicated by the Pharisees and Scribes. Jewish education maintained a religious motivation and goal, continuing to recognize the home as the main institution for the discipleship of children (Orr 1939, 903). Despite the location of learning, Jewish children were required to memorize the Scriptures and the religious teachings of the faith (Ferguson 1993, 102-03).

**Lifestyle modeling.** Beginning with the patriarchs, the Hebrew people were diligent in their efforts to teach by example. Students were trained as their mentors modeled character and service daily before them (Reed 1993, 45). Many examples of lifestyle modeling are found in the Old Testament, including the leadership transitions from Moses to Joshua and Elijah to Elisha.

In Moses, Joshua found a clear picture of excellent godly leadership. Moses, having led the people of God from bondage, grew in knowledge and wisdom. As Moses lived faithfully before the people, Joshua learned spiritual lessons that would greatly impact his own leadership abilities (Hull 2006, 56). Having been born in bondage, Joshua soon became Moses' closest associate after the Exodus from Egypt (Alexander 1973, 209). Among other things, Joshua served as military commander, spy, and survivor of forty-year wilderness wanderings. These qualities made him the clear choice to follow his mentor, Moses (Alexander 1973, 209).

The covenant community eventually recognized Joshua as Moses' successor (Merrill 1994, 454), but Joshua's task would not be a simple one. Two events found in Deuteronomy 34:9-12 were obvious factors in his early success. First, God provided a fullness of "the spirit of wisdom," which was seen as an adequate certification and equipping to follow in the footsteps of Moses (Merrill 1994, 454-55). A second positive influence that gave much validity to Joshua's leadership was Moses' public laying on of hands, which "symbolized the transference of covenant authority and responsibility from the one to the other" (Merrill 1994, 454-55).

Another great example of lifestyle modeling among Old Testament prophets is Elijah who was obviously involved in the training of the "sons of the prophets" (2 Kgs 2) and also passed the mantle to Elisha after years of personal investment (Moore 2007,

161-62). At the initial point of his calling (1 Kgs 19:19-21), Elisha was required to leave his life, family, and possessions to follow the great prophet Elijah. Though Elijah initially threw his mantle on Elisha as a symbolic transference of prophetic power (House 1995, 225), Elisha picks up that same mantle for himself in 2 Kings 2:13, receiving in some sense the spirit of Elijah (House 1995, 260). As Elijah departed, Elisha's greatest purpose was only beginning. In the absence of his teacher, the young man of God was prepared to follow in obedience (Alexander 1973, 273).

**Discipleship in the New Testament**

Christ commissioned His immediate followers to "Go therefore and make disciples *(matheteusate)* of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching *(didasko)* them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). Many consider the purpose of the New Testament church to be exclusively evangelism, but this is only the beginning of Christ's calling. Jesus expanded the mission beyond a broad effort of world evangelism to a mission philosophy that required each disciple to become a teacher/equipper (Hasel 1991, 144-45). The making of disciples *(matheteusate)* involves three dimensions: deliverance, development, and deployment. Biblical Christianity must include salvation, sanctification, and sending (Hull 2006, 34).

While the Great Commission does require the practice of evangelism in a corporate context of local church community, the text primarily speaks to the "making of disciples" (Matt 28:19). A discipleship emphasis extends the mission beyond the multitudes, down to the intentional development of a single believer. Christ's emphasis on disciple-making renders "going," "baptizing," and "teaching," subordinate participles (Blomberg 1992, 431).

Christ did not commission His followers to simply convince unbelievers to accept the intellectual concepts of the gospel. Instead, Jesus required a response to His commands. Faith in Jesus Christ is much more than a thoughtless decision based on an emotional feeling. "That faith means complete commitment and personal union between the believer and Christ is evident from other terms that are equivalent to faith" (Ladd 1974, 307-08).

**The teaching of Jesus.** While there is no specific style of teaching exclusively endorsed by scripture, the general principles of Christ's teaching ministry and discipleship are most beneficial to follow. Jesus used many different methods to communicate His message, including parables, object lessons, dialogue, comparisons, and hyperbole (Rall 1914, 65-67). He provided information for learners in such a way, that it enabled them to invest themselves in the process. Jesus led the disciples on a journey of self-discovery (Reed 1993, 65-67).

Jesus taught by modeling throughout His earthly ministry, as the patriarchs did before Him. Few stories demonstrate this practice as well as John 13:1-17, where Jesus washes the disciples' feet (Bruce 1983, 278). As the Passover Feast approached, Jesus astonished His closest followers by performing the duties normally reserved for slaves (John 13). His actions were incomprehensible for the disciples, recognizing Jesus' position (Carson 1991, 458-60). Why would He serve His followers? Jesus drove home the point in John 13:13-14, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If then, your Lord and Teacher, has washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Jesus maximized every teachable moment, living the lesson before His followers (Yount 1996, 345). In John 4:35 Jesus compares lost souls to the fields in need

of harvest through the use of illustrations. As He explained the great need for workers in the harvest, Jesus was clearly referring to the work of reaping lost souls of men. Some believe it likely that Jesus delivered this challenge while standing before an actual field, providing a vivid display for those men that day (Hunt 1997, 87). Others believe the text places emphasis on the Samaritans, in particular, as the fields ready for harvest (Tenney 1997, 96-97). Regardless of the text's interpretation, Christ demonstration was an exceptional model for effective teaching.

As He shared His message, Jesus was consistently learner-centered in His preaching/teaching methodology. "Jesus knew His learners, and He used that knowledge to focus His teaching for maximum effectiveness in each situation" (Yount 1996, 351). While He lacked the availability of modern technology, Jesus obviously made outstanding use of every creative opportunity (Stein 1994, 7). His lessons seemed to focus on the context of the hearers and the environment in which they lived every day. The content of the lesson is meaningless to the hearer if the method is ineffective (Orr 1939, 904). "He baffled the proud scribes with his wisdom, but was simple enough to be loved by children" (Piper 2004, 29).

The twelve disciples were a diverse group of men who observed the Savior first hand for three years. "They traveled with Him, ate with Him, laughed, and prayed with Him. They witnessed numerous miracles of healing, feeding, and restoring" (Yount 1996, 342). Christ was constantly evaluating the response of His disciples to the various experiences of ministry (Matt 8:26; Mark 8:29), discovering how best to lead His learners toward His purpose (Yount 1996, 317).

**The training of the twelve.** Three distinct groups were present among the disciples. First, large masses of people followed Jesus everywhere He went (Matt 4:25,

8:1; Mark 3:7; Luke 11:29). Though they were not close to Him, they were often considered followers. A group of twelve men were specifically selected by Jesus (Matt 10:2). These disciples would later be referred to as apostles after the ascension of Jesus. Finally, an inner circle of disciples existed (Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33), comprised of three men: Peter, James, and John (Freedman 2000, 348-49).

Jesus practiced and promoted somewhat of a paradoxical philosophy of mass multiplication of disciples by means of individual training. While He regularly taught before large crowds during His ministry, perhaps His most significant teaching was experienced in a small group setting (Powers 1996, 20). The modern church must intentionally see beyond the natural allure of large crowds, remaining focused on every individual in the crowd. Jesus made individual people His priority, recognizing "the learning of faith requires a person-to-person kind of teaching" (Powers 1996, 24).

Though He spoke before multitudes of people, His messages were often geared toward His small group of twelve disciples and their approaching ministries (Green 1997, 257). Though many followed Jesus, His relationship with His twelve personally selected disciples was uniquely intimate (Belsterling 2006, 78). A consistent and personal demonstration led these passionate followers to become committed imitators of their Master (Green 1997, 24).

The disciples were not called from a list of most qualified or interested candidates. Instead, Jesus initiated the process of mentorship, deliberately choosing the men He would most impact. "John reveals that in close proximity, Jesus retreated with, ate with, lived with, and demonstrated respect for the distinctiveness and individuality of each of His disciples, nurturing each according to his needs" (Belsterling 2006, 78).

These closest followers surrendered to Jesus' authority, watched His ways, learned His words, and imitated His character (Hull 2006, 47).

"One of the most amazing and significant facts of history is that within five centuries of its birth Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire and even the support of the Roman state" (Latourette 1953, 65). Christ primarily accomplished this overwhelming task through the discipleship of His closest twelve followers (Hendriksen 1973, 447).

Jesus taught a distinctive discipleship. Though the definition of disciple often refers to a "learner," Jesus cultural context included the idea of "follower" as well (Hull 2006, 66-67). Jesus was not merely attempting to transfer intellectual knowledge from His mind to these twelve men who followed Him. His intent went much deeper than teaching information to be stored cognitively. Jesus was preparing these men to change the world (Bruce 1971, 12).

**Process of multiplication.** "Missions and education are inseparable" (Jas 1915, 91). Christ expected His followers to communicate His teachings as a lifestyle, following His example by reproducing disciples. Christians begin a life-long process of following Christ's example at new birth, but they are equally responsible to provide an example for others to follow (Grenz 1994, 381). Conversion is only the door of discipleship. The biblical model of mentoring includes casting of a vision, the building of a relationship, and the training of a learner (Belsterling 2006, 79).

The Apostle Paul, likewise, pressed his learners to become imitators (*mimetes*) of his own example (1 Cor 11:1). His personal challenge was based on the perfect example of holiness, Jesus Christ (MacArthur 1984, 249). Paul had witnessed the benefits of this approach to discipleship first hand as Barnabas invested in his early ministry (Acts

9:26-28). Lifestyle modeling was never to be the exception, but rather the expectation of all leaders and laymen in the local church (Polhill 1992, 243).

The process of disciple multiplication should never be minimized "to a formula, program, or technique" (Moore 2007, 164). Regardless of a leader's abilities or philosophies, his efforts will be empty without divine assistance. Effective mentoring requires a special touch from the spirit of God "that cannot be packaged, manipulated or controlled" (Moore 2007, 164).

"The word disciple means a learner, a pupil, a scholar, one who comes to be taught. The idea of teaching and learning is preeminent in the word disciple" (Pentecost 1971, 14). Paul's words to Timothy present a good curriculum for discipleship. "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach (*didasko*) others also" (2 Tim 2:2). While this text speaks specifically of the training of potential elders, one can sense the requirement of all believers to entrust the Word of God to others, equipping them for God's glory.

Disciples (*mathetas*) must be trainable and teachable. Jesus' disciples were normal men with faults and failures, but He made them into disciple-makers (Yount 1996, 345). This is the crossroads of education and evangelism, reaching and teaching others to reach and teach others (Lea 1992, 201).

**Required obedience.** The New Testament Epistles reiterate a mandate of spiritual stewardship in discipleship, revealing that every believer is accountable for his own personal study of God's Word (Lea 1992, 215). Christians are instructed to be workers, unashamed of their investment in biblical preparation for ministry, 2 Timothy 2:15. Simple study and knowledge are not enough to stand against heresy. Believers should be known as those who are, "rightly dividing the word of truth." Every Christian

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is required to study God's Word and avoid needless distractions to the truth (Lea 1992, 215).

> The Bible teaches clearly that the evidence of God's work in a life is the inevitable fruit of transformed behavior (1 John 3:10). True belief is followed by obedience; Faith that does not result in righteous living is dead and cannot save (Jas 2:14-17). Professing Christians lacking any fruit of true righteousness will find no biblical basis for assurance of their salvation. (MacArthur 1988, 23)

Diligent theological discovery and spiritual development are required of every follower of Jesus Christ. A transformation in action should be expected of the hearers of God's Word, bringing them to a point of consistent obedience (Taylor 2009, 58). An authentic follower of Christ will have a proper understanding of His authority, leading naturally to personal obedience. "Our experience of the power and sufficiency of God will exist only in the context of obedience. God's power is available only for God's purpose" (Price 1987, 148). Though works cannot save a person, the regenerate sinner cannot help but work.

Individual commitment to obey Christ is what forms faith community. "In fact, because we all confess Jesus' lordship, the bond between us is greater than all other human bonds" (Grenz 1994, 625). One's being a Christian is truly an issue of lordship (Pentecost 1971, 78). Is Christ only Lord of a portion of His followers? Is there a distinction between a Christian and a disciple of Christ? "Do not, as I have sometimes heard done, distinguish between being a 'Christian' and being a 'disciple' with the idea that discipleship is on a deeper level…. If I am not a disciple, fulfilling the demands of discipleship, I am not a Christian" (Price 1987, 54)! Disciples will obey their master.

**Total abandonment.** The call of Christ to his disciples was not an invitation to an environment of ease or safety. To follow Jesus was to be like Him, to walk where He walked. No less commitment is expected of modern day Christians. "Disciples are like

their teacher" (Bock 1994, 169-170). Jesus never promised His followers a mission of social popularity or material prosperity. Christian theological, Dwight Pentecost, made it clear; the call of Christ has nothing to do with the desires of men and all to do with the glory of God.

> In all honesty before God, would we have to confess that we have stopped somewhere short of that which is the New Testament standard? Discipleship to Jesus Christ means that Jesus Christ has an absolute right to one's life, to do with it as He sees fit; and, while we have given Him certain rights and allowed Him to control in certain phases, we have retained rights to certain areas ourselves. We are not disciples. Discipleship means that Jesus Christ possesses every material thing that I have, it is His. It isn't a question of what I am willing to give to Him; it is a question of what I hold back from Him that is rightfully His…. As long as Christ can reveal His will to me and I choose to debate and to decide whether or not I will do it, I am not a disciple of Jesus Christ. (Pentecost 1971, 20)

The call of discipleship is clearly defined by Jesus in Luke 9:23. "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." The previous text contains three specific commands: "(*arnesastho*, deny oneself), (*arato*, take up), and (*akoloutheito*, follow)" (Bock 1994, 852). These commands are extreme to say the least, and they require a continual commitment on the part of every follower of Christ (Bock 1994, 852).

The calling and expectations of the Master are great. To what degree do His followers "desire to come after" Him? This is the question, and it will inevitably be answered by every Christian's response. Will each follower "deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow" after Jesus (Luke 9:23)? This is the call of a true New Testament disciple of Jesus Christ (Green 1997, 372).

## Conclusion

At the foundation of all Christian educational endeavors one will find the concepts of community and discipleship. These are not temporary fads by which men will

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find passing benefit. Instead, these ideas are inseparably woven into the fabric of biblical

Christianity. The new covenant community of Christ is by nature the corporate

representation of the individual disciples of Jesus who are actively multiplying

themselves to the glory of God.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY AND DISCIPLESHIP
THROUGH SMALL GROUPS

**Foundations Expanded**

Progress in Christian education is often thought of in terms of creating fresh techniques and using creative methods. Many churches tend to explore the procedural question of, "How?" to do things better. But Knight argues that more attention should be given to the questions, "What?" and "Why?" (Knight 1998, 3-4). What is the purpose of Christian education, and why are small groups recognized as the means to this imperative end?  This chapter will describe the foundational philosophy, the biblical purpose and methodological outcomes of a small group ministry built upon the biblical concepts of community and discipleship.

The research of chapter 2 established community and discipleship as legitimate biblical foundations for small group ministry. These two foundations, however, must be further expanded and defined in application, allowing for greater understanding of the church's mission. The stated purposes of the educational ministry of any church should be a mirror image of the purposes of the entire church body. Small groups provide a "functional expression to the church's DNA" (Taylor 2009, 9).

Approaching the educational questions of "what?" and "why?," from the biblical concepts of community and discipleship, leads the church educator to embrace four foundational purposes. The development of biblical community in the local church creates a dual environment of loving service (*diakonia*) and intimate fellowship

(*koinonia*). Likewise, Christian discipleship leads to practical training of Christians at every level of spiritual maturity (*didasko*) as well as an evangelistic mobilization (*kerygma*) of the community of Christ to reach the unbelieving world (Pazmino 1997, 45).

## Biblical Community in Christian Education

Having established the theological rationale for biblical community in Chapter Two, consider the outcomes of such community. Community experienced through Christ produces an unconditional love for others through and a supernatural fellowship with Christ and His followers.

### Loving Others through Service

The Bible describes God as holy and just, yet He is simultaneously pictured as gracious and forgiving. God cares for fallen men, and seeks to reestablish the relationship that was broken in the Garden of Eden (Hasel 1991, 169-70). He has chosen to use believers to communicate this gospel message with a heart of service (Moore 1981, 57).

**God's demonstration of love.** "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Woven through all the Old Testament stories of bondage, punishment, conquest, and exile, are obvious threads of divine deliverance, mercy, and love. Likewise, the New Testament records the greatest demonstration of love ever known, in the gift of God's only Son, Jesus (John 3:16; Rom 5:8). "It is true that the death of Christ is a powerful demonstration of the love of God and therefore a strong motivating incentive for us to love God and be reconciled to Him" (Erickson 1998, 837).

**God's love shown through His people.** This divine demonstration of love moves the people of God to imitate His righteous acts. A natural product of community is a clear demonstration of the love of Christ to others. In John 13:34-35, Jesus establishes love as a foundational Christian characteristic. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Brotherly love is observed by the world as believers openly display love for each other, and Jesus declared that this is an essential characteristic of His church. Mutual love should be evident to all who come in contact with believers. Their actions should demonstrate a heart to serve other people.

When a member of the early church experienced personal struggle everyone seemed to feel a common pain in the crisis (Acts 12:5-19). They possessed a spiritual fellowship in sufferings. Likewise, Christians of every era are called to share in the sufferings of the crucified Christ. Jesus explained in John 15:18-25 that believers should expect persecution from the world who hates them because of Him. Small groups provide a loving environment of hope in difficult times.

**God's love demonstrated through service.** Paul taught that Christians had "been called to liberty;" but he cautioned the believer, "do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13). The love of God must drive believers to serve others in Jesus' name.

The Greek word, *diakonia,* embodies the idea of a loving servant among God's covenant community. Small groups must endeavor to equip its participants to serve one another (Pazmino 1996, 47). Though this word can refer the office of deacon (1 Tim 3:10), the more general definition is used to describe the Christian service expected of all

believers (Luke 22:26). To possess the love of Christ is to serve others as Christ also served. John 12:26 is a key text: "If anyone serves (*diakoneo*) Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant (*diakonos*) will be also. If anyone serves (*diakoneo*) Me, him My Father will honor."

Christians are not simply called to serve broadly as they find opportunity. Instead, believers are to go with God. Where He serves, His children serve too. Love for others, saved or lost, is a sign of authentic discipleship, but an absence of God's love is a clear sign of one's spiritual deficiency. "Christian educators are called to equip Christians for the task of service within the local church and the task of incarnating their faith in life through efforts and actions" (Pazmino 1997, 47). Believers will be identified by their selfless service of love in Jesus' name.

> Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

**God's love demonstrated in grace.** Small groups possess the unique opportunity for believers to show God's love to others. These intimate ministry environments provide a doorway to a second chance for individuals who have made mistakes but now wish to reconcile with God and man (2 Cor 5:18). "If all of life rests on the two commandments of loving God and loving others, it seems that doing both in a small group would be a good idea" (Cloud 2003, 211-12).

"The act of loving others sacrificially is unnatural" (Hull 2006, 144). Believers must resist their own desires, yielding to the selfless character of Christ. Still, some people "want to be Christian without being Christlike" (Hull 2006, 146). The church is

commanded to share God's love with the world (Matt 9:12-13). Christians must possess a heart to serve others, refusing to be detoured by personal circumstances or struggles (Cloud 2003, 64).

Small group ministry has the unique ability to serve as a redemptive family, meeting needs and providing support amid the numerous challenges of life. Many will be drawn into small groups by the outpouring of love displayed by the community, but these outsiders may come without any previous church experience. Still, their circumstances may demand encouragement and reinforcement from the people of God in order to overcome difficulties (Cloud 2003, 67-68).

The church must be the body of Christ. People will inevitably enter the process with a myriad of challenging experiences and painful consequences of sin in their lives (Taylor 2009, 31). Leading a small group will be messy work if one hopes to achieve the intended biblical goal of the church. You cannot show the love of Christ to dirty people and keep your hands clean (Cloud 2003, 34).

People need groups that are willing to be authentic and open to discussing negative or unpleasant issues. While some would say these issues are discouraging, an honest group of believers who admit and deal with reality will attract many who have considered church unimportant in the past. Cloud says that small groups must make an intentional effort to "normalize the struggle" (Cloud 2003, 63). A vital part of corporate authenticity is individual accountability. Group members must trust one another, becoming vulnerable enough to expose their true emotions (Cloud 2003, 82).

**God's love demonstrated in modeling.** Personal relationships are a valuable tool for teachers who endeavor to follow Christ's example by becoming a shepherd-teacher (Bredfeldt 2006, 52-54).

People want to be loved by their teacher. People need to be loved by their teacher. Truth without love is a medicine that tastes so bad that no one ever wants to take it. Theoretically it could help, but no one ever gets better because they cannot stand to take the medicine. In the same way, people will rarely receive truth unless it is learned within the context of love from a caring shepherd. (Hunt 1998, 123)

The example of Jesus Christ challenges faithful followers to replicate His love. Jesus not only taught His people to love; He demonstrated that same love in His actions. Persecuted, suffering, insulted, and beaten, the Son of God was unshaken by His foes. He was not teaching the disciples from a textbook. Instead, He taught them from an outflow of His person and purpose for the coming kingdom. "Jesus practiced what He preached" (Stott 2001, 146).

No better instruction can be prescribed for a small group than to love others in Jesus' name. Scripture requires believers to reject selfishness and embrace sacrifice, choosing to think of others before themselves (Phil 2:3). These desired steps of humility will surely lead Christian educators toward the intended goal of making disciples and helping those disciples become more like Jesus.

**Fellowship in Community**

While biblical community is demonstrated by the expression of God's love to others, His love must be translated into fellowship among God's chosen people. This fellowship is not simply the function but the substance of Christ's loving body.

**The definition of fellowship.** Fellowship is often a confusing concept for Baptists, who are likely to equate the word with a constructed building on the church premises (fellowship hall) or a covered dish meal after the annual Homecoming celebration. Though common, this simple misconception is extremely destructive, considering the importance of true fellowship to the body of Christ. While most church

members would see fellowship as something one does, it is more appropriate to consider fellowship in terms of what the congregation is, its corporate identity. Fellowship implies a community of training and nurture, encouraging each believer in his/her spiritual growth (Pazmino 1997, 46).

**The identity of fellowship.** The New Testament is clear in its distinction of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:11-13). Though a foreign concept to many churches, true fellowship is seen when multiple members make individual contributions to the mission of the greater whole. The church's fellowship is related primarily to its being the body, not simply doing the right things. The Greek word, *koinonia,* emphasizes the believer's "fellowship with God and with other Christians. It includes the process of training, instruction, and nurture which enable persons to grow and mature in their faith" (Pazmino 1997, 46).

The spirit of unity and the function of ministry are outflows of the church being properly knit together as one unit in Christ Jesus (Eph 4:16). A believer's fellowship in the gospel is essential to the church's fulfilling its unified mission. God will finish what He has started in every believer. Spiritual growth is a process of a Christian's becoming the part of the body God intended (Phil 1:3-6). Understanding these truths helps believers see the individual responsibility they possess in the mission to which God has called the church.

Each member of the body has been given gifts for one specific purpose, edifying the body of Christ (Eph 4:7-12). The mission of God can only be successful when the people of God see their gifts as kingdom benefits instead of personal privilege. The purpose of God's giving gifts to men is that He ultimately gains glory through their use. The purpose and definition of true fellowship can be summed up in the equipping of

the members of the body for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12). Believers help one

another become the best they can be for God's glory. No one part of the body is

independent or self-sufficient. Every individual part of the body needs the whole to

develop and function properly (1 Cor 12:12-27).

**The purpose of the fellowship.** The fellowship of believers is both individual

and corporate, understanding that all Christians are unique parts of one body of Christ.

Believers have to make an individual sacrifice in order to join a corporate mission (Rom

12:1-21). While 1 Corinthians 6:15 and 1 Corinthians 12 focus more on the individuality

of the "members" (*mele*) of Christ's one body, the passages found in Ephesians 1:22-23

and 4:25 emphasize the unity and continuity of the parts as they work together as one

body (*The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament* 2004, 135-38).

Members of the body are interdependent upon one another. Like Moses in

Exodus 17:8-13, believers are unable to accomplish their God-given tasks alone, brothers

and sisters help lift their hands to finish the tasks to which God has called them. Believers

must connect through "learning communities" that help them maintain readiness

throughout their entire lives (Pazmino 1997, 219). These communities, though not found

outside a formal classroom, provide immeasurable benefit to the educational process.

Christian education must embrace both formal and informal strategies,

recognizing the value of opportunities inside and outside the conventional classroom

setting. Informal education "occurs through shared identity and experience" (Pazmino

1997, 84), providing for an opportunity to grow and learn in a more practical arena. Some

would rightly argue that experience alone is not enough to completely prepare the student

for the Christian walk. Neither informal nor formal education can independently satisfy

the learner's needs. Each depends on the other, and the effective Christian educator will explore every potential avenue of discipleship (Pazmino 1997, 84).

**The health of the fellowship.** The church, like a human body, receives nourishment and sustenance from the head. Growth in fellowship is not possible without connection to the Head of the body, which is Jesus Himself (Col 2:19). The church will be unproductive if it departs from the foundational leadership of Christ. In fact, Christ Jesus is what/who makes the fellowship among the members of the body possible. Men are weak and hopeless aside from a connection to the Vine (John 15:5).

Though mortal men will always struggle in their efforts to collectively work to accomplish a common goal, Scripture explains that fellowship with the Father makes fellowship with other believers essential (1 John 1:6-7). The believer's relationships with others are strengthened by a common desire for the coming kingdom and a life of holiness. When God's people seek His will primarily, He will bless them accordingly (Matt 6:33). Each member of the body must encourage others to remain focused on the corporate task at hand (Richards 1975, 41).

## Biblical Discipleship in Christian Education

The education ministry of the church will effectively make disciples as it focuses on a strategy of intentional discipleship in a small group environment. The church's corporate mission must be broken down into bite-sized pieces, creating an atmosphere conducive for individual purpose (Taylor 2009, 17). While a church may experience added challenges with growth, small groups will keep the church small in the practice of its disciple-making ministry (Taylor 2009, 22). An individual disciple is better

equipped to fulfill his specific calling when opportunities for ministry are made accessible in a context of small groups (Taylor 2009, 9).

**Investigating God's Word**

The most obvious element of the educational process is teaching. Jesus was a teacher, and He has called His followers, likewise, to be teachers (Matt 28:19-20). The word "teach" *(didasko)* is used 97 times in the New Testament. Teaching is a very important part of the mission of the church, but one must remember the proper priority of things. While Christ knew the Scriptures better than any other, His greatest authority came from His relationship with the Father (Briner 1998, 24).

**The source of disciple education.** God the Father is the source of all knowledge. Any hope of attaining wisdom rests on man's dependence on the all-knowing God of the universe. The Creator/Redeemer has revealed Himself through Holy Scriptures, and He is the ultimate teacher (Ps 25:4-5). Being filled with the Word of God, one is empowered to accomplish the work of God. A repentant heart, operating in the strength of the Spirit, is able to resist Satan and his schemes. "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps 119:11). Pazmino agrees, "A God-centered approach establishes as its starting point the authority of God as revealed through Jesus Christ and illuminated by the Holy Spirit within Scripture"(Pazmino 1997, 120).

A biblical perspective, however, would not limit truth to God's Word. While the Bible is the final authority, "all truth is God's truth" (Knight 1998, 171). In fact, one who possess truth need not be afraid to explore other complementary areas of study. Various fields of education have made countless contributions to the search for

knowledge. A Christian teacher who remains open to extra-biblical contributions to the field of education will enable the learner to possess a balanced approach to learning, but God's Word will always remain the standard for all truth (Knight 1998, 172).

In John 8:32, Jesus presents the purpose of truth. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." Truth is not merely communicated to convince the hearer or to change his mind. In reality, truth changes the circumstances of those who are bound. It releases them from the chains of fallacy and darkness (Hunt 1997, 56-57). And "if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed," John 8:36.

**Foundation for disciple education.** What is the definition of truth? Moral relativists would have everyone believe that truth is subjective and flexible. They would say that everything is dependent on circumstances, environment, or even a man's personal views (Groothuis 2000, 40-41). Pluralism is rampant in American culture today, preaching the universal validity of all worldviews, but the church must not be silent in this discussion (Bredfeldt 2006, 74-76). Absolute truth is real, and this belief is required of anyone who seeks a legitimate and effective biblical investigation. Small group teachers and leaders must begin with biblical authority and scriptural reliability as their foundation for communicating God's Word (2 Tim 3:16).

Once man has overcome the cultural battles of relativism and pluralism, he must determine what is entirely true. If there is only one truth, from whence does it come? Of course the true believer's answer is the Bible, and this book leaves no room for debate on most issues. Standing at the forefront of importance in scriptural investigation is Christology. Small groups are worthless without a biblical perspective of the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. He was, and is, the "the way, the truth, and the life," John 14:6. Jesus

"was the true interpreter of the Torah; the true builder of the Temple; the true spokesperson for Wisdom" (Wright 1996, 538).

**Methods of disciple education.** While small groups most often choose to meet together in a central location on a regular basis, their educational process must reach outside the classroom environment. A teacher cannot make disciples exclusively from a classroom lectern. "Learning in the church is not limited to formal study groups. Learning last longest when it comes from believers' participation in the total life of the church" (Powers 1996, 301).

True discipleship is the preparation of the total learner (Richards 1975, 61). Every student learns differently. Some people are visual learners, while others learn best by auditory modality. A more informal learner will depend on a kinesthetic or tactile modality, depending on a more involved process of instruction (Kellough 2008, 210). Regardless of one's preferred sensory portal, the teacher must endeavor to discover and develop each student, understanding these differences.

The most important factor in discipleship is Christ. One's surrender to the lordship of Christ is his secret to spiritual maturity (Yount 1996, 267). The challenge comes in the triad of human experience, which includes thinking, feeling, and doing. Everyone is unique in their approach to learning. "If our learners are to grow in the Lord, we must help them personalize Bible truths" (Yount 1996, 252). What must a teacher do to accomplish this task?

> The answer to this dilemma is to balance the rational, emotional, and behavioral elements of our own Christian growth as teachers as well as in our teaching. Develop biblical concepts, embrace Christian values, engage in spiritual activities. Proper understanding, through cognitive learning, provides the foundation for biblical values and ministry. Personally embracing biblical values, through affective learning, injects life into biblical exegesis and practice. Competent Christ-centered

activities, through behavioral learning, build the bridge between Bible study (concepts and values) and the world of people in need. (Yount 1996, 255-56)

**Schooling and learning.** The need for schooling has been established, recognizing the undeniable value of formal education. Still, Christian educators must teach for the sake of obedience, not simple information transfer (Taylor 2009, 58). The Great Commission mandates the observance of Christ's commands (Matt 28:19-20). Bible knowledge is not enough. The strategy and curriculum must move beyond lesson transmission to life transformation (Yount 1996, 3).

"Schooling" is somewhat of a restrictive word that carries with it the idea of an organized transfer of prescribed information in a narrow format and controlled environment. Knight argues that "learning is a process that, unlike schooling, is not limited to an institutional context. It is possible to learn individually or with the help of someone else…. Learning is a lifelong process that may occur at any time and any place" (Knight 1998, 9). This informal expansion of the education process allows for the training of the total learner. "Caswell's framework distinguishes three different foci for education: student interests, social functions, and organizational knowledge. In other words, educational philosophies may center on persons, communities or content as their primary focus" (Pazmino 1997, 119).

Another issue related to the tension between schooling and learning is the acceptable means and method of directing the learner. An effective educational philosophy will embrace the need for both learner freedom and learner accountability in the process. An inviting environment of discovery is imperative, but one must also weigh the risks of being overly permissive (Kellough 2008, 124).

**Lifestyle modeling.** Life change can only take place when teachers are deliberate in their efforts to go beyond information to application, bringing the text alive in relevant ways to help the unbeliever meet Christ and the believer to grow in his relationship with the Savior. This is often done best through modeling a lifestyle of Christ-likeness (Taylor 2009, 64-65). "Teachers shape, challenge, and change people, and in doing so, they lead" (Bredfeldt 2006, 13).

Leaders who imitate Jesus are examples to all who follow them, and the reproduction of their ministries will be their primary goal (Moore 1981, 17). Transformed believers must become disciple makers who model spiritual disciplines and demonstrate unwavering faithfulness to Christ. They must set the pace for others to follow. Disciples are to become imitators of those before them. The result of teaching through lifestyle modeling will be the natural multiplication of disciples (Moore 1981, 92).

**Results of disciple education.** An honest investigation of Scripture brings liberation in the life of every believer (John 8:31-32). The truth of scripture is not a mystical secret hidden from the hearts of men, but disciples of Jesus Christ must be willing to abide in His Word in order to know His truth. An important part of every believer's journey is his search for truth.

> All persons discover truths of God's creation, providence, and/or redemption, but the particular challenge for the Christian is to discern what 'truths' apply to the thought and practice of Christian education or what 'truths' are in fact consistent with a Christian worldview. This is a constantly challenging and arduous task from which no Christian is exempt in his or her sphere of responsibility and calling. (Pazmino 1997, 128-29)

Once the truth is revealed to man, his freedom is gained in Christ Jesus. The words of Proverbs 1:7 reinforce this to the reader: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." True discipleship is a daily and personal process, not simply a Sunday

morning experience in a church classroom, Psalm 119:97. "Discipleship is not an easy, convenient routine; it is a demanding life" (Moore 1981, 54).

The church must be careful to maintain consistency in its educational process. An "aligned curriculum" requires objectives, instruction, and assessment to be compatible and complementary (Kellough 2008, 168). Pazmino says, "Education is sustained over time, implying a continuity of exposure and interaction along with a continuing relationship between students and teachers" (Pazmino 1997, 86). Recognizing education as a process enables the teacher to hold the student accountable for his/her progress. This consistency depends heavily on targets for teaching as well as individual goals for learning. These steps would enable students to compare objectives with the educational outcome (Yount 1996, 131-49).

## Evangelize the World

Believers must share the gospel everywhere they go. One's going is not meant as a prerequisite to the commission; it is more an assumption. As one is on his way in daily life, he must spread the good news of God's grace to all the nations.

**The process of salvation.** The word, *euangelion,* is found seventy-six times in the New Testament, and communicates a specific message of good news that must be shared. Study reveals further that the gospel message is the only means by which a man might be saved (Rom 1:15-16). This text reveals that the gospel is not to be limited to an exclusive people group or geographical location. The good news must be proclaimed among all nations, Jews and Greeks (Reid 1998, 10).

Proclamation of the "good news" is an undeniable responsibility given to every believer in the New Testament church. Proclamation, *kerygma* in the Greek, is mentioned

eight times as a noun in the New Testament. Another form of the word, *kerussein,* is used

on twelve other occasions with *euaggelion*, "preach the gospel." The verb form, *kerusso,*

is found sixty-one times, most often referring to heralding the good news of Christ (Reid

1998, 10-11).

It is very easy for Christians to become overwhelmed by well-meaning

evangelistic programs that tend to complicate the process of discipleship. It is easy to lose

sight of the basic steps of the process of new birth. The Apostle Paul describes this

progression of events in Romans 10:12-17.

> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich
> to all who call upon Him. For 'whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be
> saved.' How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how
> shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear
> without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written:
> How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad
> tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says,
> 'LORD, who has believed our report?' So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing
> by the word of God.

Salvation begins with a divine calling from the Spirit. This sending of a

believer appears last in the progression of Romans 10:15, but it is chronologically first.

Then the preaching of the gospel message comes next. Many have taken this verse out of

context, assuming its application is exclusive to the formal preachers of a congregation,

but that is an interpretive mistake. The scriptural mandate of evangelism is to all

believers. Every Christian is a "preacher" in this sense of proclamation of the good news

(Bright 1983, 83).

So, those who are sent are sent with a purpose. That purpose is to preach/teach

*(kerygma)* the unchanging truth of God's grace and glory (Pazmino 1997, 45). The

progression of proclamation naturally leads the preacher to a hearer (Rom 10:13-15).

Those who believe will "call on the name of the Lord," and they will be saved. Too often,

believers forget that God has already established the process, but this process involves the personal participation of all Christians. This should not be seen as a dreaded obligation, but an undeserved opportunity. God did not have to involve man in His process of redemption, but He did (1 Cor 1:21).

**The imperative of obedience.** Jesus had a small group of 12 men who followed Him for three years, watching and learning by following His example. Obedience was an understood part of becoming a disciple of Christ. "They were *mathêtai* (students) of Jesus" (Icenogle 1994, 119). Like these early followers of Jesus, small groups in the church must embrace a Christ-centered approach to accountability in education if they hope to produce biblical disciples.

Christ has commanded every believer to be a witness. "Billy Graham has said the number one reason we should witness is because God says we should" (Reid 1998, xii). Jesus spoke clearly of an individual believer's indisputable responsibility as a messenger of the good news. In the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, Christ requires every follower to take His gospel to the nations. This "going" is a continual process, not a one-time event. The verb "go" is found in the aorist tense, which translates it "having gone" or "as you go." The command to "go" speaks to the lifestyle of every believer during his regular activities. Christians are to be witnesses as they go, on their way each day.

True discipleship is an act of obedience for the believer who proclaims the gospel, but this imperative of obedience is quickly transferred to the hearer. The new recipient of God's saving grace must also obey the Master's commands. "The Greek term for 'believe' (*pisteuō*) means more than giving mental assent. It implies total commitment, resulting in obedience" (*The Complete Biblical Library* – Mark, 457).

**The multiplication of disciples.** So, the believer obeys by making new disciples who become obedient to God through regeneration. One can see how evangelism has the glory of God as its primary motivation. The act of "going" is not the main command in the Great Commission. Followers of Jesus are to become disciple-makers (Reid 1998, 11). "The main command of Christ's commission is 'making disciples' (*mathēteusate*)" (Blomberg 1992, 431).

The making of disciples is a process that begins with Christ's authority (Matt 28:18), but it continues as Christians invest time and energy into seeing other believers grow (Hull 2006,169-84). A disciple is a pupil or learner, not a customer (Powers 1996, 296). Christian consumerism has garnered much of the church's attention, making the body of Christ no different from a commercial business in efforts to draw potential "customers" (Hull 2006, 255-56).

Looking back to Matthew 28:19-20, one finds a close relationship between practical instruction and personal evangelism. Both teaching and evangelism are responsibilities of every disciple of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is a process of personal investment where believers follow the example of Jesus (Hull 2006, 135-37). Disciples are made to reproduce other disciples who in turn develop the character of Christ. Christ has called the church to become producers of reproducers, makers of disciple-makers (Taylor 2009, 100).

**Real-life relationships.** Among the first converts to Christ was Peter, who was brought by his brother Andrew. This is the first biblical account of relational evangelism (John 1:35-42). Later, Nicodemus requested a lengthy session with Jesus, requiring the Lord to devote His entire attention to this one man (John 3:1-18). While this seems unheard of in our day of fast-pace schedules, Christ was demonstrating the most effective

method of evangelism, personal communication. Small group ministry must still endeavor to evangelize the lost through one on one relationships (Richards 1975, 252).

Robert Coleman, is known for perhaps the simplest book ever printed on the subject of evangelism, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. In this book, Coleman lays out a biblical model of Christ's own method of evangelism. The second step in his process is of particular interest here. Jesus used association to evangelize. He associated himself with those he taught. The disciples of Jesus "were distinguished, not by outward conformity to certain rituals, but by being with Him, and thereby participating in His doctrine, (John 18:19)" (Coleman 1963, 38-39).

**The glory of God.** Aside from mere obedience to the God of salvation, what motivates the believer to go tell others of God's grace? The former discussion leads the reader naturally to the glory of God. Psalm 79:9 reveals the true heart of biblical evangelism, "Help us, O God of our salvation, For the glory of Your name; And deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, For Your name's sake!" Though evangelism can be motivated by a believer's desire to see people saved from everlasting torment, further study should expose a deeper impetus for Christians.

The first paragraph of John Piper's book, *Let the Nations be Glad*, explains this clearly. "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever" (Piper 2003, 17). So, missions and evangelism must be fueled by a desire to see God glorified in worship.

Christians serve a jealous God, though unbelievers might find this difficult to comprehend. God's true divinity requires His jealousy. He alone is worthy of glory. In Isaiah 42:8, God declares, that "I am the LORD, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images." God is the all-sufficient One, and all believers can find complete satisfaction in Him alone. Christians must not seek to be satisfied by another thing or person. God deserves all glory. "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him" (Piper 2003, 31). John Piper calls this the most important aspect of his theology.

**Conclusion**

From the two biblical foundations, community and discipleship, identified in Chapter Two, the reader discovers four resulting purposes of the church: to serve others, to study the Word, to connect with the body of Christ in true fellowship, and to become a producer of disciples. These four products of community and discipleship will be explained by using the acrostic L.I.F.E. The concept of L.I.F.E. Groups is not original to Beulah Baptist Church, nor is there any standard definition of terms related to the name. For the purposes of this project, the letters of the acrostic represent the four primary pillars of Beulah's entire ministry: love, investigation, fellowship, and evangelism.

The foundational concepts of L.I.F.E. Groups are taken straight from scripture. While Beulah Baptist Church has always possessed a church-wide emphasis on brotherly love, biblical investigation, ecclesiastical fellowship, and world evangelism, this new initiative places increased attention on these biblical imperatives through the small group ministry of the church. The church leadership sees this adjustment as more than an improvement to small groups. Instead, this increased emphasis on a balanced biblical purpose through small groups will inevitably impact the entire church.

CHAPTER 4

IMPROVING THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
OF THE BEULAH BAPTIST CHURCH

**Summary of the Project Phase**

Using the research from chapters 2 and 3, the writer developed a project endeavoring to improve the small group ministry of Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia. This project had three general goals: (1) teach the purpose of small group ministry, (2) teach the benefits of small group ministry, and (3) make needed adjustments to stimulate participation among attendees.

The major portion of the project was an eight-week church-wide campaign, which focused on deliberate improvement of the small group ministry in the church. Prior to the beginning of this emphasis, worship attendees were given a survey (see Appendix 1) to evaluate their knowledge and perceptions of small group ministry. Another survey was given to the worship attendees at the conclusion of the designated emphasis. Small group attendance records were kept throughout the emphasis, including comparisons of small group and worship attendances.

The results of the pre and post-project surveys and attendance records were then compared to evaluate the effectiveness of the small group campaign in meeting the project goals. Did those who participated in the emphasis realize any improvement, and did they, themselves, grow in the process of these events? A third survey was presented to new members six months after the emphasis was over, providing yet another

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perspective on the progress of Beulah's small group ministries. These surveys would be compared to the others taken by longer standing members to compare the various ideas of newer and more established members in the body. This chapter will outline the three major segments of the project phase: pre-campaign activities, the eight-week campaign, and post-campaign activities.

## Pre-Campaign Activities

The pre-campaign activities divided into three major undertakings: selecting participants, completion of the research instrument and planning for the eight-week campaign. This segment of the project depended on many people and lasted approximately 10 weeks.

### Selecting Participants

The researcher endeavored to identify 30 Beulah members who were willing to participate for the entirety of this project, agreeing to complete both a pre and post-project survey. This number of attendees would equal approximately 10% of the average adult small group attendance at Beulah Baptist Church. The invitation yielded 34 participants. This result provided a broad representation of the body and exceeded original expectations.

The recruiting was done primarily by the pastor's personal invitation. He explained the purpose and potential benefit of the project from the pulpit, while the staff helped to influence the laity more directly. The small group teachers kept the campaign before the people on a weekly basis, helping to maximize the results. Many seemed

motivated by the mere hope of improvement in Beulah's function of ministry. The campaign was advertised in all publications, including the Branch, Banner, and Bulletin.

Avenues for participation in this campaign were found in a variety of arenas and formats. Preparation was required in every area of ministry, including the messages and songs for worship, relevant small group lessons, the development of a devotional booklet, and the intentional leadership efforts of the teachers and directors of each small group. Every facet of this team effort was needed to prepare an effective campaign.

**Completion of the Research Instrument**

The leadership team served as an advisory counsel in the beginning, providing suggested goals, steps, and expectations for the campaign. This team was comprised of Beulah's three Associate Pastors as well as the three Ministry Directors. Several meetings were held for the specific purpose of providing insight on the current condition of the small group ministry at Beulah. This information was of great benefit to the writer, understanding the contribution gained from a diverse pool of advisors.

Two weeks prior to the beginning of the campaign, the pastor developed and distributed the pre-campaign surveys (see Appendix 1) to those who were willing to participate in the project. He proceeded to explain the purpose of the survey and ask everyone to prayerfully consider each question. The surveys were taken home and returned the following Sunday.

All ethical standards were followed in preparation and implementation of this research process. An analysis was done on this pre-project research prior to the beginning of the campaign in order to make adjustments to the intended curriculum and structure of the eight-week effort.

**Preparing for the Eight-Week Campaign**

Successful completion of a project of this scale requires much strategic planning and practical preparation from numerous individuals. While the writer was the primary researcher, many individuals invested time and energy, hoping to see Beulah small group ministry improve.

**Leadership team.** Preparation for the campaign included the organization and training of the leadership team, which would assist in the implementation of various parts of the project. This team's initial meeting was six weeks prior to the beginning of the campaign. The project goals were shared with the team, and they formed a plan for implementation. Each staff member was given specific responsibilities most related to their area of ministry. The pre-campaign survey was evaluated and adjusted as team member made suggestions for improvement.

**Collection of data.** A review of small group attendance records revealed some unhealthy patterns among the membership at Beulah Baptist Church. These statistics were shared with the Leadership Team in hopes of finding some intentional plans for improvement. Issues of concern included inconsistency of both the group attendees and leadership, a disproportionate gap between small group and worship attendance, and obvious deficiencies in the area of congregational care.

This research was presented to the small group leadership as well as the general congregation after the initial survey had been completed. While the information was surprising to some, the presentation was intentionally positive, presenting not only

problems, but also intended goals of the campaign to improve these issues of concern.

The congregation was encouraged and hopeful about the coming improvements.

**Daily devotionals.** The publication of the devotional booklets required the preparation of twenty daily devotions, which communicated the biblical and theological foundation for small group ministry. These twenty devotions were divided into with four groups of five, allowing a sustained daily emphasis on small groups for an entire month. This also provided an instrument to encourage members to begin a daily quiet time with the Lord.

**Sermon preparation.** The pastor devoted four Sunday morning sermons to the communication of the biblical foundations of the small group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church. As with any messages, the pastor invested between 10 and 15 hours of sermon preparation in each, which included the explanation, illustration, and application of biblical texts related to L.I.F.E.

## Implementing the Eight-Week Campaign

After planning was complete, the eight-week campaign began. The emphasis included two teacher-training sessions, a four-week sermon series from the pastor, a four-week devotional series provided by the church staff, and the general promotion throughout the eight-week endeavor.

## Activities of the Leadership Team

The full assistance of the Leadership Team was imperative, understanding the enormity of the task. The music and technology played an important role in the

communication of the messages. As always, the Associate Pastor of Music was responsible for the overall organization of the four worship services. He was instrumental in presenting a united message throughout the Pastor's sermon series.

The Associate Pastor of Missions worked with the Directors of Youth and Children's ministries to serve in an advisory role. While the measurement of this project would be realized primarily through the adult small groups, the team wanted the benefit to be experienced by the entire church, including the youth and children.

While the entire staff assisted the Pastor in this campaign, the Director of Education carried the largest burden among the Leadership Team members. She was directly responsible for the completion of the devotional guide as well as the promotion of the pre-campaign teachers meetings. She worked closely with the pastor in these efforts, maintaining consistency in methods as well as message.

**Teacher Training Sessions**

The first of the two training sessions was scheduled for the first week of the campaign. Teachers and Directors were given detailed data that described the current state of the small group ministry at Beulah Baptist Church. A better understanding of the current condition of small groups helped these leaders prepare for needed improvements. The goals were shared with the small group leadership, and the expectations of the teachers and directors were explained. Expectations of these leaders included personal participation in the campaign and promotion of the emphasis among his/her particular small group.

A second training session was planned after the third week of the campaign, providing an opportunity for the pastor to share further insights gained from the pre-

campaign surveys that had been collected and analyzed. This data revealed several key areas that needed improvement, including improved teacher preparation, communication of a balanced purpose, and increased focus on inward care and outward evangelism.

**L.I.F.E. Devotionals**

One major part of the campaign for small group improvement was the preparation and promotion of 20 personal devotions developed with the goal of communicating the biblical significance and practical benefit of small group ministry in the church. The Director of Education had primary responsibility for preparing these daily devotions, but other staff contributed as well.

These 20 devotions were compiled into a booklet titled, "Meditations on L.I.F.E." The acronym, L.I.F.E., represents the four outcomes of Discipleship and Community, which are love, investigation of Scripture, fellowship, and evangelism. These four biblical products served as the framework for the four weeks of devotions given to the congregation. Each area would receive equal attention, five devotions each.

**First week of devotions.** Devotional booklets, containing five daily spiritual thoughts, were distributed to every small group attendee. Each participant was encouraged to spend at least ten minutes each day in meditation and prayer related to the devotional thought provided in the booklet.

The first week's devotions focused exclusively on the love of God. Day one's title was, "Loving Others: God Shows Us How." Using the example of God's compassion in Psalm 78:38, the devotion taught the basic Scriptural principle that,

"People who have experienced God's love and forgiveness are expected to show that same love and forgiveness to others."

The second devotion entitled, "Loving Others: It's What We Are to Do," reminded believers of their obligation to love one another in Christ (John 13:34-35). Small group participants were further taught that brotherly love is expressed as Christians pray for one another (Jas 5:16), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), offer encouragement to one another (1 Thess 5:11), and serve one another in Jesus' name (Gal 5:13).

Day 3 further emphasized God's requirement of his people, recognizing that this required love can only be found in the heart of God. In 1 John 4:7-11, the reader found a clear expectation of mutual love among all believers. The Great Commandment, found in Matthew 22:37-40, drew a close parallel between a Christian's love for God and his love for others. Believers love others because God loves others.

The fourth day focused on the believer's ability to make an impact by demonstrating the love of Christ. This devotion featured the words of Jesus from Matthew 9:12-13. This passage opened the reader's eyes to the direction of Christ's love. He did not come to earth "to call the righteous, but sinners." Understanding the heart of God, his followers must move toward a sinner-focused compassion. Followers of Christ must love the people He loves.

Day 5 brought week 1 to an end with a devotion entitled, "Loving Others: Jesus Lived It Out For Us." Based on Philippians 2:3, this lesson aimed to remind all participants that Christ commands believers to care about other people more than themselves. Each disciple of Christ must become selfless in spirit, making other people a

personal priority in life.

Week 1 response was overwhelming. The vast majority of the small group attendees were actively using the devotional guide and expressing their affirmation of its content. After a day of dedicated meditation on Saturday, the small groups summarized and discussed the previous week's devotions. Discussion led straight to the teacher challenge for the next weeks quiet times. The new booklets were distributed, and Monday started a new series of five daily devotions for L.I.F.E.

**Second week of devotions.** Monday brought the beginning of the second week of devotions. Monday's spiritual emphasis was lifestyle modeling. The devotion writer referred to Deuteronomy 6:4-9, pressing the importance of demonstrating a lifestyle of faith all day, every day, and in every way possible. Families and friends are watching to see how the believer lives his life. Parents were challenged with their responsibility to intentionally expose their children to God's commands and make efforts to ensure their obedience to them as well.

Day 2 led the reader to examine the example of the greatest teacher ever to live, Jesus Christ. He possessed a broad methodological approach to teaching. Discovering that Christ used parables (Luke 10:30-37), object lessons (John 15:1-8), dialogue (Mark 8:27-29), comparisons (Matt 23:27), and hyperbole (Luke 18:25) in His teachings, believers learned that they too have the ability to use any mode of communication necessary to spread the gospel.

Wednesday's devotion, though focused largely on the investigation of God's Word, aimed more specifically to challenge each learner to pass the gospel on to others in

their sphere of influence (2 Tim 2:2). Multiplication and equipping, though evangelistic, are essential elements to discipleship training as well.

Participants were then reminded of the Great Commission's command to teach. One's investigation of the Scriptures does not take place in an educational vacuum. Instead, believers are trained as disciples who become teachers themselves. This lesson taught the participants that small groups are the best vehicles through which the purpose of the whole church might be effectively accomplished. Several members mentioned the devotions at the mid-week service, sharing how the study was helping them see small groups in an entirely new light.

Day 4 was titled, "Investigating God's Word: Not Just For Teachers." The reader was exposed to 2 Timothy 2:15, which challenged every believer to be diligent in his kingdom work. Sincere kingdom work comes from diligent study of Scriptures. Followers of Christ should perform shame free works for the Lord, knowing they have invested themselves into the study of His revealed Word.

The final day in week two was dedicated to sharing the importance of truth in relationship to the study of God's Word. The Gospel of John 8:32 served as the introductory text, emphasizing the spiritual freedom found in the truth. Devotional participants were taught about the importance of absolute truth and the preeminence of inspired Scripture over personal opinions. Members seemed to enthusiastically embrace the second week of devotions based on a proper investigation of God's Word. Many comments were made about the benefit of the devotions during the second week, confirming the decision of the small group attendees to embrace the campaign.

**Third week of devotions.** After dealing with the subjects of loving others and investigating God's Word, week three led participants through a five day devotional journey on the subject of fellowship. Teachers were encouraged to discuss the previous two weeks of devotions with the small group prior to class. New devotional booklets were distributed amongst the small group attendees, and each teacher gave a brief introduction to the biblical concept of fellowship.

The emphasis on day one was recognizing that fellowship is more than an action; it is an identity of the body of Christ. Paul encouraged each Christian to acknowledge his personal value and significance among the various parts of the body (1 Cor 12:27). The devotion taught that the biblical concept of fellowship includes, but is not limited to, disciple training, instruction, and nurture.

Tuesday's devotion directed the readers to Ephesians 4:3-5, which described the foundation of the church's fellowship. Christ's church is referred to as "one body," but it further explains this unity is founded on oneness in all matters of faith. One Spirit empowers the church, while one hope motivates believers in their steadfast labor. The individual believers that make up the church share one Lord and faith, one baptism and God. These theological realities provide sufficient explanation for the underpinning of fellowship in Christ.

The third day concentrated on the diversity of gifts among God's people, found in 1 Corinthians 12:4. Though Christians possess fellowship through one Spirit, they also demonstrate the same fellowship through a diversity of spiritual gifts. Every believer is uniquely equipped and called with his own combination of personality, experiences,

interests and spiritual gifts, making his contribution equally valuable to the function and purpose of the greater body of Christ, the church.

Jesus clarified His expectations of His followers in John 20:21 when He said, "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." Because of the fellowship of the Spirit, all believers, regardless of their gift set, share a common purpose in Christ. He has called this corporate body of individual followers to His singular purpose. No secondary plan or purpose is needed for the children of God. The Creator/Redeemer has a uniquely designed plan for every believer, but this plan is unquestionably compatible with God's greater purpose in creation.

Friday's study brought the third week to an end, redirecting the devotional focus to church health. Nourishment for the body is clearly found in only one source, Christ Jesus alone (Colossians 2:19). He is the Head of the body, and the body has no ability to grow outside of His sustenance. Without the head, the human body will die. Likewise, the church is lifeless without Jesus Christ. This subject brings to mind a similar passage found in John 15:1-6, where Christ draws the picture of His being the Vine and the believers are identified as the branches. The conclusion of the matter is that without Jesus every human being is hopelessly dead in his sins, but because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, sinful man can find new life.

**Fourth week of devotions.** Evangelism was the topic of the final week of L.I.F.E. devotions. Paul's address to the church at Rome was used to explain the process of gospel advancement (Rom 10:12-17). Faith is required for salvation, but faith depends on hearing. Paul goes on to explain that this hearing depends on the Word of God. So, how will they hear the Word of God? God ordained, personal evangelism is the answer.

Day 2 brought another reminder of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20, emphasizing the most basic of motivations for evangelism, obedience to Christ. The reader was challenged with the call to obedience in spreading the gospel. Christ commanded that His follower respond with action to this calling, and disobedience was not provided as an option for His true disciples.

Wednesday's devotion carried the participants to the next logical step in this process of evangelism. Believers follow the commands of Christ in obedience because they desire to see Him glorified in their lives. David, in Psalm 79:9, demonstrates this hope for God's glory by praying for deliverance. His example shows that Christians must not be motivated by selfish desires of this fleeting life. Followers of Christ are motivated by the glory of His name. Evangelism is a product of worship, and there is no exception.

The devotion for day four referenced Acts 1:8, reminding the reader of the undeniable call of God to the nations. Obedience to this calling, however, will not be realized if the church's local community is neglected. The heart of biblical missions starts across the street, but it flows all around the world. Members of Beulah Baptist Church were challenged to think bigger than numbers on a church report. The sum of the church is more than the number of seats filled on Sunday mornings.

The last of the twenty days of devotions was significant, showing the need for relationships in fulfilling the purpose of the church. Using John 1:40-42, the devotion challenged each believer to intentionally build relationships with others for the express purpose of bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ. The example in the text is Andrew bringing his brother, Peter, to Jesus. This illustration shows the true disciple's model of missions. Having become a follower of Christ, Christians do as He has done before their

eyes. Demonstrating the walk of Christ, each disciple goes out to build relationships and make disciples of the nations for the glory of God.

**L.I.F.E. Sermons**

After the first four weeks of the emphasis, all small group attendees had been given the opportunity to participate in 20 daily devotions, and the small group teachers and directors were offered two leadership-training opportunities. These activities laid the foundation for the second half of the emphasis, which would include the four-week sermon series from the Pastor.

Members were exposed to L.I.F.E. from the moment they drove onto the church campus. Banners were fixed in key areas for emphasis, while posters lined the hallway at every small group's door, declaring the key points of the L.I.F.E. campaign. Upon completion of the small group hour, members began to enter the Worship center, which was decorated for L.I.F.E as well. A power point was prepared each week to welcome members to worship, emphasizing one of the four major points of L.I.F.E.: love, investigation, fellowship, and evangelism.

**Sermon 1.** The first of the four sermons was an overview of the biblical and theological foundations for small group ministry at Beulah Baptist Church. Chapter 2 of this project provided much of the substance for this particular message. The pastor presented two specific Scriptures in the introduction, laying the groundwork for the biblical imperatives of community and discipleship.

Matthew 22:37-39 was used to promote the need for community in the body of Christ. Believers were challenged to love God unconditionally. Demonstrating God's

love to others and becoming one in His fellowship were presented as natural outcomes of biblical community. Next, the pastor gave Matthew 28:18-20 as the gospel mandate of discipleship. Two specific outcomes are produced when Christ-followers obey His commands, disciple education and evangelism.

**Sermon 2.** The second message in the series dealt with community and the love of God. Scripture included John 12:26, where Jesus says, "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor." The point was made that a disciple is a follower, and he must first seek to serve Christ. This service to Christ will, however, lead to a natural love and service of others.

The words of Jesus, found in Matthew 20:28, provide additional context to the expectations of His followers. Jesus explains that He did not come to this earth to be served, but to serve others. His followers, likewise, must seek a selfless model of ministry, hoping to glorify the Father as they meet the needs of hurting people everywhere. The Pastor expressed the imperative of service inside and outside of the church.

**Sermon 3.** After having heard the call to community demonstrated through love and fellowship, the pastor preached the second message on the responsibility of every disciple to move beyond intellectual retention. Discipleship goes beyond the transfer of information; it mandates a follower's life transformation. The pastor's message, explained how small groups can facilitate the mobilization of the body. A believer's sincere investigation of Scripture will lead him to live a life, "as a worker who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Tim 2:15).

Believers were challenged to take the study of God's Word more seriously, recognizing the insignificance of life apart from God's purpose. Each member of Beulah Baptist Church was encouraged to move beyond Bible knowledge, choosing to focus on personal application of the biblical text. The sermon challenged Christ's followers to become doers of the Word, and to embrace small groups as a vehicle for this disciple preparation and mobilization (Jas 1:22).

**Sermon 4.** The final sermon in this series began with a closer look at the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20. This message focused on the inseparable nature of discipleship in Christianity, driving home the necessity of multiplication as a characteristic of Christ's followers. This closing message explained how diligent learners become effective teachers, who eventually train others to make disciples themselves. Particular emphasis was given to Acts 2:40-47, where the early church is described as steadfast, unified, selfless, missional, submitted and surrendered to God. The Holy Spirit was unleashed on the church, and the result was a supernatural movement that continues today at Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia.

## Post-Campaign Activities

Following the eight-week campaign, the survey was re-administered to the 34 members (see Appendix 1). The post-campaign survey was identical to the pre-campaign survey with the exception of two questions. The second survey asked the participants to identify from memory what the acronym L.I.F.E. represented. Then each member was asked if he/she observed a notable improvement to the small group ministry of Beulah Baptist Church over the course of this campaign.

These two surveys were compared to determine if the stated goals of the project were met as expected. These goals were (1) to teach the purpose of small group ministry, (2) to teach the benefits of small group ministry, and (3) to make needed adjustments to stimulate participation among attendees.

Six months after the conclusion of the survey, the pastor recruited a large group of new members who were not attending the church when the initial survey was given. After one announcement, 67 new attendees agreed to participate in this survey. Most of the final subjects were new members, but some were still praying about that step. All surveyed were Christians.

One final post survey action that was not originally planned was the establishment of a new members' class at Beulah Baptist Church. After the campaign, the staff discussed ways to better communicate these purposes of the church through the small group ministry. The results were many, but one major suggestion that seemed most helpful, was to begin a new members' class that focused on and taught the four purposes in a four-week format, including virtually anything relevant to the new members categorized inside one of the four pillars.

Overall, the campaign went according to plans, though adjustments were made throughout to maximize effectiveness. The leadership team played a big role in the post assessment of the campaign as well.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

**Introduction**

Now that the project has been completed, an evaluation must be made related to the results of the small group campaign. This chapter will provide insight into the success of the project in its efforts to accomplish the intended goals. Strengths and weaknesses of the project will be discussed as well as possible improvements that could have been made. Finally, the writer will share personal reflections on the project.

**Evaluation of the Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to strengthen ministry performance, while renewing congregational commitment to the Small Group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia. This project had three general goals: (1) teach the purpose of small group ministry, (2) teach the benefits of small group ministry, and (3) make needed adjustments to stimulate participation among attendees.

The project yielded significant success in all three goals, with particular focus due to the second goal. The survey results, as well as the debriefing of the leadership team, support this conclusion. After the project was complete the participants understood the biblical importance of small groups and gained a new awareness of the benefits of small groups as well. While participation in small groups increased significantly, the goal was not completely met.

**Evaluation of Goals**

Thirty-four active members agreed to analyze the impact of the 8-week project by completing both the pre-campaign and post-campaign surveys. All thirty-four participants completed the project. This was achieved by taking the pre-campaign survey, by participating in the 8-week campaign, and by filling out the post-campaign survey. These thirty-four people represented over 10% of Beulah's adult small group attendance at the time. Data was evaluated using the surveys, attendance records, and the debriefing of the leadership team.

**Demographics**

The demographics for this 34-person group of members who participated in this project are as follows:

**Age range.** The 34-person group was very diverse, ranging in from age 22 to age 84. The age distribution was remarkable: age 20-30 (7 participants), age 31-40 (7 participants), age 41-50 (7 participants), age 51-60 (1 participant), age 61-70 (5 participants), age 71-80 (6 participants), age 81-90 (2 participants).

**Tenure as a member of Beulah Baptist Church.** The 34-person pool of participants consisted of a more established segment of the Beulah Baptist Church: 0-3 years (10 participants), 4-10 years (9 participants), 11 or more years (15 participants). This gave the survey more substance, understanding these participants had substantial experience in small groups at Beulah prior to this campaign.

**A second group surveyed.** A second group of newer members was surveyed six months after the campaign had ended. This additional pool of 67 new members was questioned in hopes of discovering any additional insights from a newer member's perspective. These participants had not taken either of the previous two surveys. Demographically, this second group was balanced as well: age 21-30 (17 participants), age 31-40 (18 participants), age 41-50 (13 participants), age 51-60 (10 participants), age 61-70 (7 participants), age 71-85 (6 participants).

**First Goal: Teaching the Purpose
of Small Group Ministry**

While most attendees of Beulah Baptist Church may have possessed some general idea of the purpose of small group ministry, the project endeavored to make the purpose concise and easy to understand. The goal, in part, was to measure small group improvements through the perceptions of those surveyed.

**Multiple choice survey results.** Of the survey questions, numbers 5, 9, 13, 14, 15, and 18 all provided insight into the progression of Beulah's purpose. While answers to question 5 were virtually unchanged, significant improvements were recorded in the remaining related questions. The post-campaign survey showed that 100% of the established members agreed with the statement, "A first time guest would feel very welcomed by our entire small group. We are deliberate in our strategy to make guests feel at home." That was improved from 94.10% in the initial survey. Of the new members, 92.60% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, providing substantial affirmation understanding these participants were, in fact, true guests in small groups more recently than others surveyed.

Question 13 provided interesting responses as well. While small variations were noted in the "agreement" and "strong agreement" categories, the most interesting statistics were found when reviewing the disagreements. When given the first survey 36.30% disagreed with the statement, "I communicate throughout the week with people in my small group." The second survey of the same group, however, revealed that only 14.70% disagreed with the same statement. The final surveyed revealed the new members responses, which rendered only 10.60% in disagreement with the statement. These findings show noted improvement in the perception of the group members' community relationships, which was a major portion of the communicated purpose.

Questions 14 and 15 emphasize the evangelistic purpose of the small group, noting marked improvement once again after the campaign. When first surveyed, 48.50% of the established members felt that their small group possessed an intentional plan to reach the lost, while that percentage increased to 58.80% in the second survey. Likewise, the first results showed that 27.30% disagreed with that same assertion, while that number had decreased to 11.80% by the second survey. Based on the results of question 15, the participants recognized an increase in evangelism through their group efforts. This was noted by both a decrease in negative responses to the statement as well as an increase of affirmative responses.

Question 18 provided one of the most encouraging results of all related to the purpose of the small group ministry. Only 63.70% of participants initially agreed that their group emphasized a balance approach to the four purposes presented in L.I.F.E. This statistic improved to 82.30% who agreed with the same statement in the second

survey. This result, coupled with the 81.80% of new members affirming the same, provides substantial evidence of improvement.

**Fill in the blank survey questions.** The post-campaign survey included two new questions, providing additional insight into the project's success. When asked to provide the definition of the acronym L.I.F.E., which had been presented in the campaign as the corporate church purpose fulfilled through the small groups, 19 of 34 established members (56%) were able to recall the information without any assistance. Interestingly, 42 of 67 new members provided the correct answer, yielding a surprising 65% result.

While this result was unexpected, one might easily deduce the reasoning behind it. One suggestion that came out of the debriefing meeting of the Leadership Team was the establishment of a new members class that teaches these four purposes in a four-week series, required of all new members. Therefore, all new members were exposed to an intensive study of the purpose that the general membership did not receive. This new members class inevitably aided in their answers to the survey, increasing the new members' percentage of correct answers over the more established membership.

The second question included in the second survey asked, "Have you seen a notable improvement in Beulah's fulfillment of these four purposes of L.I.F.E. since L.I.F.E. Groups began?" The result was very encouraging. While 64.70% of 34 members surveyed answered "yes" to the question, only one respondent answered "no." The remainder of those surveyed left the question blank. This response again revealed success in the teaching of the purpose of small groups. The majority of members not only see current improvement, they also see present success in the fulfillment of the mission.

**Reaction from the leadership team.** Reports were given and suggestions made during the post-campaign debriefing of the Leadership Team. Everyone felt that major improvements had been made during the campaign, but also agreed that much improvement remained. The Director of Education reported specific testimonies of groups that had excelled beyond expectation during this period of examination. She also started an annual event called the Crown Awards, which will recognize the outstanding accomplishments of various groups in the four specific areas of demonstrating love, investigating God's Word, fellowship, and evangelism. The Leadership Team enthusiastically supported this idea, and will be participating in the planning and promotion of this event in the future.

It was this leadership meeting that also birthed the idea of a radical change in the new members class, which had become terribly ineffective. The Director of Education developed a four-week new members class that investigates the biblical and theological foundations of L.I.F.E. Groups, while introducing the new members to the Beulah staff and philosophy of missions and ministry. These adjustments have been very helpful in the communication of the purpose of small groups to the congregation.

**Second Goal: Teaching the Benefits
of Small Group Ministry**

**Survey results.** Of the 25 multiple-choice questions, six were directly related to measuring the participant's perception of personal benefit in small group ministry involvement. The results of questions 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 24 are explained below, giving some insight into this issue.

While question 16's results were virtually identical when comparing the two established member surveys, number 17 conveyed some interesting news. On the first survey, 70.50% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement, "I do not want to imagine my life without my small group at Beulah Baptist Church." After the campaign, that figure increased drastically to 94.10%. The new members, though possessing much less history by which to judge, still showed an 85.10% agreement with the statement. Further investigation of the statistics reveals that, while 17.60% of respondents disagreed with the statement in the initial survey, the second survey brought no disagreement at all. These results displayed the participants' increased recognition of value in Beulah's small group ministry.

Number 19 requested that each member specify the level of benefit that he/she gains from participation in a small group. While the first survey showed that 78.10% of participants rated their personal benefit between 7-10, the post-campaign survey yielded an increase of the same scale to 94.10%. This was a significant shift (16%) in perception, showing that people were gaining an increased appreciation for small group involvement at Beulah Baptist Church.

More encouraging signs were found in the responses to questions 21 and 24. The first of the two questions was presented in a negative way, "My small group has not always been worth my time in the past." In the first survey of established members, 76.50% of established members disagreed or strongly disagreed with the comment, but that figure grew to 91.20% by the second survey of the same group.

Number 24 presented the following statement, "My small group is an irreplaceable part of who I am as a believer." Originally, 8.80% of respondents disagreed

with this comment. The final survey, however, rendered the negative responses extinct. No one disagreed with the statement after the campaign.

**Reaction from the leadership team.** The Leadership Team agreed there had been an obvious change in attitude toward small groups. Though practicing the principles of L.I.F.E. are a completely different issue, everyone seemed to embrace the practical benefits of fulfilling these four purposes through the small group ministry. While several small verbal concerns were raised in teachers' meetings and personal conversations with members from the Leadership Team, none of the team members experienced what they considered to be major opposition to the campaign or concepts of the project. In short, the church seemed to happily buy into the concept of L.I.F.E. groups as presented by the staff in this effort.

**Third Goal: Making Adjustments
to Stimulate Participation**

The third goal of the project was to realize a measurable increase in small groups during the promotion of this campaign. The writer hoped to see an overall growth in small groups by promoting their purpose, motivating attendees to connect their friends and family to the Beulah community. Other desired improvements included shrinking the small group/worship attendance ratio and observing improvements in the individual faithfulness of small group attendees.

**Survey results.** Questions 1 and 2 revealed an interesting improvement in perception. After the initial survey, attendees were given a personal record of their

attendance in small groups. This allowed them to verify their perceptions. This was obviously of benefit for some, recognizing the shift in answers on the second survey.

The statement of question 1 was, "I consider myself to be a faithful attendee to my small group." The initial percentage of agreement with this statement was 73.50% of those surveyed. This figure dropped to 67.60% on the second survey. Question 2 asked the each participant to choose a category that best described the frequency of his/her small group attendance. The first survey showed that 94.10% thought they attended at least 8 of 10 weeks, but that same figure dropped to 91.20% by the second survey.

Though it is difficult to measure overall improvement of Beulah's small group ministry in a survey, the change in member perceptions found in questions 23 and 25 are encouraging. First, number 23 stated, "I see my small group as an example of the way it ought to be done." Initially, 81.80% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, which was encouraging to the writer. After the campaign, however, the percentage of agreement surged to 91.10%. This reveals a marked improvement in the function of the small groups. Teachers and directors were making obvious improvements in their efforts to successfully fulfill the four purposes of the church through the small groups.

The final multiple-choice question dealt with the small group's display of care for its members. Providing an opportunity to complain about community neglect, the survey statement was, "I have been absent for more than two weeks without having anyone from my group call or write." While 69.70% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this, that number increased to 76.50% who disagreed or strongly disagreed after the campaign. This emphasized once again the improvement of care demonstrated through the care group leaders.

**Additional survey questions.** The second survey, which was offered to all 101 participants, asked members to identify from memory what the acronym L.I.F.E. represented. The survey found that 19 of 34 established members (55.88%) were able to clearly state the purpose of the church by using L.I.F.E. Whereas 42 of the 67 new members (62.68%) were able to clearly state the purpose.

Then each member was asked if he/she observed a notable improvement to the small group ministry over the course of this campaign. When asked if they had seen notable improvement in the small group ministry over the course of the campaign, 22 of the 34 (64.70%) questioned said "yes"; 11 left the answer blank, while 1 responded "no." The same question was asked of the new members, and the results were very similar. 42 of 67 of the new member participants (62.68%) responded affirmatively, while 25 left the answer blank. This revealed that only one of 101 participants said they did not see "notable improvement in Beulah's fulfillment of these four purposes."

**Attendance records.** A quick assessment of the attendance records reveals an increase in small group average attendance from 395 to 452 when comparing the first quarters of 2010 and 2011. This is a net increase in small group attendance of 14.40% in 12 months. While Beulah has experienced growth for the past few years, this was a more rapid increase from previous years. When comparing first quarter attendance records for 2009 and 2010, one finds a 10.10% net increase in average small group attendance, growing from 386-395. Therefore, one can draw the conclusion that the campaign may have contributed to an increase in growth for the year in question.

The project also endeavored to close the ratio between small group and worship attendance by 5%, which had been becoming increasingly broad over the past

few years. On the surface, it appeared this goal was altogether unsuccessful. A two-year comparison of worship and small group averages reveals that 84.76% of the morning worship attendance attended small groups in 2010, compared to only 78.34% in 2011. It was disturbing to consider the results appeared to be contrary to the intended goal.

A closer examination of the statistics revealed an interesting fact. The attendance report from 2010 was unique, showing an increase in small group average from the previous year (2009) from 386 to 395, while recording a decrease in worship attendance from 503 to 466. One factor that might have contributed to this drop in worship attendance was the fund raising for the building program. The new worship center was completed just six months after these records were recorded, and the finance committee was attempting to raise as much money as possible at this time. The core group at Beulah may have been strengthened during those days, but the fringe attendees lacked motivation to participate. While this is not an excuse for lower attendance in worship, it might be an explanation.

Regardless of the cause, this reality presented an interesting issue. The 2010 average percentage of worship attendees who connected to small groups grew to 84.76% from the previous year's 76.70%, but this seeming improvement was due to the decrease in worship attendance referred to above. Further, if the average worship attendance for 2010 had just grown by the same number as the small group attendance, the percentage of worship attendees in small groups would have only increased to 77.15%.

This one change in statistics would have rendered the small group/worship attendance report as follows: 76.70% in 2009, 77.15% in 2010, and 78.34% in 2011. While this is not the increase the writer had expected, it is also not the decrease the

statistics appear to reflect upon a quick analysis of the data. The issue remains; only 452 of 577 worshipers (78.34%) attend small groups. While the church is happy to see worship attendance grow from 466 to 577 in one year, leaders must discover ways to further close the gap between the worshiper and small group community.

**Reaction from the leadership team.** The Leadership Team considered the results of this section very encouraging, recognizing first the growth in personal knowledge gained. It was obvious that members considered themselves to be more faithful than they had been. In fact, the Director of Education shared with the team how many disputed the attendance reports initially, before recognizing, in fact, the report of their attendance was correct.

The team was excited about the 14.40% small group growth in one year, but they were equally disturbed by the little-affected gap between worship and groups. Additional ideas for improvement were provided, including an effort to close the back door of the church to intentionally care for the membership. This display of compassion and care must be demonstrated through the L.I.F.E. groups and embraced by the participants of each community. The staff suggested the need to intentionally shift attention from an exclusively evangelistic focus, to a shared focus on disciple-making and community.

The display of awareness among the new members to the four purposes of L.I.F.E. was a huge consideration for the new members class, which began during the campaign. The report of 62.68% of new members knowing L.I.F.E. by memory was a victory, affirming the Director of Education's decision to apply the concepts of L.I.F.E. to this initiatory class.

Another great annual report followed the project phase. September marked the beginning of the new church year at Beulah, and upon the calculation of the annual church profile it was reported that the church baptized 70 new believers during the previous 12 months. While this is not as many as other churches, this was the highest number of baptism in the 142-year history of the church. This result is not exclusively the result of the campaign, but the Leadership Team agreed that L.I.F.E. groups have played a major role in this advance in evangelism.

### Evaluation of Needed Improvements

Project plans originally included a comparative analysis ACS database for a two-year period, which would have allowed a comparison of four categories of attendees. This would have allowed the writer to evaluate the flow of attendees into various categories of commitment, determining the overall success of commitment growth in a particular segment of the church population.

Unfortunately, the church changed church software two times during the project, rendering the original plan impractical. Thinking through that possibility might have prevented that unfortunate occurrence. Three of the four member categories mentioned in chapter 1 (A-D), realized an increase in small group attendance, but it was impossible for the researcher to determine accurate percentages of increase comparatively due to the drastic variation of enrollments of the two reports. Due to this software transition, an increase due to overall growth could have been interpreted as an improvement in commitment errantly.

After analyzing the data, it is obvious that some questions were confusing to those surveyed. The writer should have taken more time to consider the possible

perceptions of the questions before giving the survey. In particular, questions 8 and 11 made participants basically vote against the Bible, which most were obviously unwilling to do. In fact, upon more consideration, the writer admits that it could be argued that Bible study is most important because without a proper theology, one cannot hope to love, fellowship or evangelize properly.

Question number 10 reveals an issue related to relationships. The statement was "I personally know the name, occupation, and individual family members of every single person in my small group." While 20.50% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement in the first survey, that percentage increased to 28.10% in the second survey. This shows that people felt less connected relationally after the campaign than they did in the beginning.

After some consideration, the writer felt the results could have been skewed by the influx of new members into small groups during this time. The question could have been better stated, providing exclusion for knowledge of newer members' information. This would have allowed for a participant to compare his/her knowledge of a more defined group of people, allowing for less subjectivity in the answer. Some groups doubled during this short period of time, making it virtually impossible to demonstrate a positive result on this question.

The results of question 20 presented some confusion as well, seeming on the surface to contradict other data received in the survey. The statement was, "I attend my small group out of a feeling of obligation, not because of benefits gained." While the intent of this question was originally to measure the participant's level of benefits realized, it is reasonable to assume there was confusion in the wording of this question.

While agreement with this statement went up by 5.90%, disagreement with this statement decreased by the same percentage.

After having been taught about the importance of covenant in community and having been told repeatedly to increase faithfulness and commitment to the small group ministry, participants likely did feel obligated by their commitment to the Lord. Again, the wording of this question lends itself to the confusion of the participants. Because of the demonstrated results of other questions, it is safe to say this question should have been re-worded.

## Personal Reflection

While the Beulah Baptist Church membership was overwhelmingly supportive, change inherently includes a measure of initial resistance. Progress can be painful, but when given biblical explanation and God-honoring motivation for change, believers willingly yielded their personal preferences.

One of the greatest challenges was the project's dependence on every teacher's cooperative support. While this was a concern of the Leadership team, no solution could have been found aside from a longer introduction to the campaign, which would have allowed the established teachers more time to adjust and buy into the concept of fulfilling the corporate purpose through the small groups.

## General Conclusions

The project was generally successful at achieving the goals established at the beginning of the campaign. This writer felt the project was used by God to inform and improve the body of Christ at Beulah Baptist Church. This campaign brought needed

changes in educational philosophy, and the church has responded in a positive way to the

fulfillment of its mission through the small group ministry.

APPENDIX 1

PRE/POST-CAMPAIGN SURVEY

**Your Date of Birth:** _____/_____/_____

**How long have you been at Beulah Baptist Church (circle one)?**

I recently joined        Under 3 years        4-10 years        11 years or more

**Place an X in the box which best represents your opinion of each statement.**

1.  I consider myself to be a faithful attendee to my small group.

| I do not attend a small group. | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |

2.  A ten week analysis of my small group attendance would be best described by:

| Attended 0-5 | Attended 5-6 | Attended 6-8 | Attended 8-10 | Never Miss |

3.  My weekly small group at Beulah helps me grow in my <u>daily</u> walk with God.

| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |

4.  I am always very excited to get to church at 9:15am to attend my small group.

| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |

5.  Small groups at Beulah are a very effective method of discipleship.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

6.  My personal attendance record testifies that small groups are an essential part of my
    weekly life.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

7.  On any given Sunday morning, Beulah has around 100 attendees in worship who did
    not attend a small group.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

8.  The most important aspect of a small group's purpose is the Bible study time.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

9.  A first time guest would feel very welcomed by our entire small group. We are
    deliberate in our strategy to make guests feel at home.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

10. I personally know the name, occupation, and individual family members of every
    single person in my small group.

    Strongly            Disagree            Neutral            Agree            Strongly agree
    Disagree

11. Fellowship, Evangelism, and Service are not as important as Bible study.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

12. Those individuals connected to my small group are my closest friends. They are the people I depend on most.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

13. I communicate throughout the week with people in my small group.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

14. My small group has developed an intentional plan to reach our lost friends and family members. The Teacher and/or Director remind us of this plan often.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

15. My small group has seen people come to Christ as a result of our outreach.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

16. During a critical time in my life (surgery, death of loved one, or family crisis), my small group was there for me, showing sincere love with calls and concern.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

17. I do not want to imagine my life without my small group at Beulah Baptist Church.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

18. My small group intentionally provides a balanced opportunity for our attendees to serve, study the Bible, fellowship, and evangelize the lost. All four of these are equally emphasized and executed by our group's leadership.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

19. On a scale of 1 to 10, (1 being least beneficial and 10 being most beneficial) my small group's overall benefit to my life would rank somewhere between:

1-2               3-4               5-6               7-8               9-10

20. I attend my small group out of a feeling of obligation, not because of benefits gained.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

21. My small group has not always been worth my time in the past.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

22. The teacher of my small group is not always fully prepared to communicate the lesson effectively.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

23. I see my small group as an example of the way it ought to be done.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

24. My small group is an irreplaceable part of who I am as a believer.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

25. I have been absent for more than two weeks without having anyone from my group call or write me.

Strongly          Disagree          Neutral          Agree          Strongly agree
Disagree

26. What does "L.I.F.E." represent in Beulah's small group ministry?

27. Have you seen a notable improvement in Beulah's fulfillment of these four purposes of L.I.F.E. since L.I.F.E. Groups began?

**Please place your completed survey in the boxes provided at the exits this morning.**

APPENDIX 2

LIKERT SCALE DATA

Table 1. Established members (pre-campaign survey)

| Statement | # of 1s | # of 2s | # of 3s | # of 4s | # of 5s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 25 |
| 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 27 | 5 |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 18 |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 14 | 17 |
| 5 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 16 | 17 |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 15 | 17 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 19 | 13 |
| 8 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 19 | 13 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 14 | 18 |
| 10 | 1 | 6 | 10 | 11 | 6 |
| 11 | 8 | 17 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 12 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 15 | 7 |
| 13 | 1 | 11 | 1 | 16 | 4 |
| 14 | 0 | 9 | 8 | 12 | 4 |
| 15 | 0 | 9 | 11 | 11 | 2 |
| 16 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 11 | 15 |
| 17 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 18 | 6 |
| 18 | 0 | 2 | 10 | 19 | 2 |
| 19 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 12 | 18 |
| 20 | 17 | 12 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 21 | 14 | 12 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| 22 | 24 | 8 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| 23 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 21 | 6 |
| 24 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 21 | 8 |
| 25 | 11 | 12 | 7 | 1 | 2 |

Table 2. Established members (post-campaign survey)

| Statement | # of 1s | # of 2s | # of 3s | # of 4s | # of 5s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 23 |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 24 | 7 |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 18 | 12 |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 19 | 13 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 19 | 14 |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 16 | 16 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 18 |
| 8 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 18 | 9 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 14 |
| 10 | 0 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 4 |
| 11 | 4 | 15 | 2 | 7 | 4 |
| 12 | 0 | 4 | 10 | 13 | 7 |
| 13 | 0 | 5 | 10 | 14 | 5 |
| 14 | 0 | 4 | 10 | 17 | 3 |
| 15 | 0 | 5 | 15 | 13 | 1 |
| 16 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 11 | 15 |
| 17 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 19 | 13 |
| 18 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 20 | 8 |
| 19 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 15 | 17 |
| 20 | 14 | 13 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| 21 | 11 | 20 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| 22 | 18 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 23 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 23 | 8 |
| 24 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 22 | 6 |
| 25 | 10 | 16 | 4 | 3 | 1 |

| Question | Y | N | Blank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Memorized L.I.F.E. purpose | 19 | 0 | 15 |
| Saw notable improvement | 22 | 10 | 1 |

Table 3: New members (post-campaign survey)

| Statement | # of 1s | # of 2s | # of 3s | # of 4s | # of 5s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 21 | 47 |
| 2 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 38 | 23 |
| 3 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 33 | 29 |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 26 | 39 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 24 | 39 |
| 6 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 25 | 35 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 36 | 26 |
| 8 | 1 | 6 | 9 | 27 | 25 |
| 9 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 34 | 29 |
| 10 | 1 | 13 | 22 | 22 | 8 |
| 11 | 10 | 37 | 11 | 5 | 4 |
| 12 | 0 | 9 | 16 | 27 | 14 |
| 13 | 0 | 7 | 16 | 30 | 13 |
| 14 | 0 | 10 | 23 | 26 | 7 |
| 15 | 0 | 6 | 26 | 24 | 10 |
| 16 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 22 | 24 |
| 17 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 27 | 30 |
| 18 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 36 | 18 |
| 19 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 23 | 32 |
| 20 | 28 | 27 | 7 | 3 | 2 |
| 21 | 23 | 30 | 6 | 6 | 2 |
| 22 | 32 | 20 | 5 | 2 | 8 |
| 23 | 0 | 1 | 14 | 34 | 18 |
| 24 | 1 | 3 | 16 | 30 | 17 |
| 25 | 17 | 24 | 10 | 7 | 0 |

| Question | Y | N | Blank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Memorized L.I.F.E. purpose | 42 | 25 | N/A |
| Saw notable improvement | 42 | 0 | 25 |

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ABSTRACT

IMPROVING THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
OF THE BEULAH BAPTIST CHURCH,
DOUGLASVILLE, GEORGIA

Phillip Wayne Bray, D. Ed. Min.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Michael S. Wilder

The purpose of this project was to strengthen the Small Group ministry of the Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia. Chapter 1 defines the ministry context of Beulah Baptist Church, while communicating specific characteristics of the project.

Chapter 2 identifies two biblical and theological foundations for small group ministry as community and discipleship. Special attention is given to the unfolding purpose of God throughout the Scriptures.

Chapter 3 explores the application of the biblical concepts of community and discipleship on the modern context of small group ministry. Four specific outcomes are identified as results of community and discipleship.

Chapter 4 explains the specific steps taken during the process of the project, including planning, implementation and gathering of results. A detailed report of improvements is given.

Chapter 5 provides a clear picture of the results of the project. Initial goals are compared with post-project results, and outcomes are given much consideration.

VITA

Phillip Wayne Bray


PERSONAL
     Born:     January 13, 1973
     Parents:  Phil and Harriette Bray
     Married:  Amy Marie Pike, August 10, 1996
     Children: William, born May 2, 1998
                 James, born October 3, 2000
                 Zachary, born May 27, 2003
                 Emory, born June 12, 2007

EDUCATIONAL
     Diploma, Rockmart High School, Rockmart, GA, 1991
     A.P.M., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999
     B.G.S., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001
     M.A.G.T.S., Columbia Biblical Seminary, 2003
     M. Div., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005
     Certificate in Apologetics, Biola University , 2011

MINISTERIAL
     Associate Pastor, Minister of Youth and Education
        New Antioch Baptist Church, Rome, Georgia, 1995 – 1998
     Associate Pastor, Minister of Youth
        Christ Baptist Church, Houma, Louisiana, 1998 – 2000
     Senior Pastor – Oak Hill Baptist Church, Millen, Georgia, 2000 – 2006
     Lead Pastor – Beulah Baptist Church, Douglasville, Georgia, 2006 – 2011