

Growth Groups - Introduction for Leaders

Material drawn from: Organic Church and Church 3.0 by Neil Cole

His Presence ⁱ

Church is not just the gathering of God's people; it is the presence of Jesus among His people. Without His presence there is no church.

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Matt 18:20)

But His presence is not with us simply to observe or comfort or to hear our prayers, but to lead us in His mission. The promise of His presence came with a commission:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

Church is ministry BY Jesus, not ministry FOR Jesus and should be measured not by our attendance but His presence.

By faith we know His presence, and by acting on that faith we see the results of His presence. This should be at the heart of what it means for us to be and do church. God dwelling with His people; Christ acting through His Body.

Jesus' Commission

Do what I have commanded you

The Great Commission must be among the scriptures best known by Christians:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

There is a very important thing to notice about this commission. Jesus did not say “teach them all I taught you” or “teach them all about me” or “teach them the bible.” He said “teach them to *obey* me.” This puts a rather different emphasis on things. Certainly we want to learn about God and for people to think deeply and intelligently about God. We therefore value teaching about God. But the emphasis of Jesus commission is not teaching knowledge, but teaching obedience to Jesus.

Teaching obedience to Jesus is not the same as teaching the stories and parables of Jesus. It is not the same as teaching the doctrines of salvation and grace and resurrection. It is not the same as preaching the gospel and leading people to Christ. All these things are good, but they are not the great commission. There is only one way to fulfil the great commission and that is to teach people to *obey* Jesus.

People need to be taught how to obey Jesus. It does not come naturally. They need to be taught how to read the bible, especially the gospels, how to listen to Jesus speaking to them through the Holy Spirit, how to believe and trust Him and how to do what He says to do.

Discipleship is like car mechanics; a group of apprentices pouring over the manual, discussing what it means and how to do it, then going out and having a go.

Starting small

Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

The basic unit of church is twos and threes encouraging one another in obedience to Jesus. That is a good place to start. If we cannot discover the presence and will of Jesus in groups of two or three, then we cannot expect to do so with a larger group. If we can't multiply groups of 2 or 3 we will never multiply the church.ⁱⁱ

Discipleship is an adventure of faith. It requires people to be open and real with one another and to be prepared to take risks and make mistakes. Disciple making is a time consuming business requiring deep relationships.

What? No bible teacher?

We must not think that every small group needs a skilled and trained leader. Three brand new believers can read the scriptures together, learn from the Holy Spirit and see God answer their prayers.

We must not hold people back because they have not been trained. We must not teach people to be dependent on us to understand the word. They must know they can feed themselves. They must know that Jesus Himself has commissioned them and sends them with His authority to do His work. They must know they can depend upon the Holy Spirit and the scriptures to be their teacher.

Our job as teachers is not to give messages *about* the word, but to demonstrate our conviction that Jesus Himself has the words of life.

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Heb 4:12)

Can you do that? Do we think we can improve on it? Trust the Holy Spirit to apply His word to a person’s life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Front-line Action from the Start

Jesus chose uneducated fishermen to be His disciples and sent them out on mission immediately. They were not trained in bible study and leadership. They didn’t know how to preach or lead prayer meetings. Nevertheless, Jesus sent them:

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” (John 20:21)

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” (Matt 10:16)

New believers must learn to trust God right away so, like Jesus, we send new believers on mission immediately.^{iv} But they must know that it is not us who are sending them but Jesus, and they go with His authority:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all

things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

The mission we are sent on is also clear; to do what Jesus did:

Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Lk 9:1-2)

Such must be our expectation from the very start of a believer’s new life in Christ. We must teach faith-filled obedience from day 1. “See one, do one, teach one.” A new believer only needs to observe ministry once before he/she should be having a go themselves. Having ministered once, they can begin to pass on what they have learnt immediately.

Going in His Name

The essence of discipleship, and therefore fulfilling the great commission, is incredibly simple; groups of two or three believers experiencing the presence of Jesus and ministering Gospel truth and healing in His authority to unbelievers.

So how and where are you going to start your group of two or three? Jesus gives us clear and simple instructions:

“Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out.” (Matt 10:11)

We start by going to a place and asking people “who needs to hear the gospel?” We are likely to be directed to poor desperate souls whose lives are in tatters. Then we do what Jesus said to do:

“As you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.” (Matt 10:7-8)

We minister healing and deliverance to those in need, and we start a Bible Discovery Group in the new believers home, not ours (Matt 10:11 above). That will ensure the gospel reaches the whole family, not just an individual.

Then, again following Jesus’ example, we baptize new believers immediately and publicly and let them baptise their converts:

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did

not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. (Jn 4:1-3)

So how do we start? We start *in* the harvest and start small with 2 or 3.

The Seed and the Soils

Jesus gave instruction about our mission both directly and through parables. The parable of the soils is very instructive:

“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.’” And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word...” (Mr 4:3-14)

Some important lessons here are:

- You need good seed – the Word of God.
- You need good soil to grow a church.
- You cannot be sure which soil is good.
- Three quarters of the seed will prove fruitless.
- Two thirds of the growth will prove fruitless.

If we have ears to hear and accept these basic truths about sowing the word, we will save a great deal of heart-ache over trying to make fruitless

situations bear fruit. Concentrate on the fruit-bearing soil and don’t waste time on the rest.

“But whatever city you enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, ‘The very dust of your city which clings to us we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near you.’ But I say to you that it will be more tolerable in that Day for Sodom than for that city.” (Lk 10:10-12)

“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matt 10:38)

Let the fruitful people be a provocation to the fruitless ones. Jesus did not lack compassion for fruitless people, but He still sent them away. According to Jesus’ interpretation of this parable, fruitless people are fruitless because they have not given up on the world’s fruits. They want the world plus a bit of Jesus. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters and He told people so.

Finding Good Soil

Although we cannot be sure we have found good soil until we see its fruit, Jesus did tell us where to look:

- bad people: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Lu 5:32)
- poor people: “God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (Jas 2:5)
- child-like people: “unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3)
- desperate people: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matt 7:7 NKJV)
- despised people: “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.” (1Co 1:27-29)

The police know where the good soil is; ask them!

Avoiding the bad soil

- Self-made people: “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” (1Co 1:26)
- Self-righteous people: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Lu 5:31-32)
- Wealthy people: “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Lu 18:24-25)

Jesus did not exactly encourage half-hearted disciples, He sent them away! Jesus loved people by confronting them with their choices. He sent the rich young ruler, whom He loved, away. To do otherwise is cruel, selfish and counterproductive! ^v

Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” So Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honour your father and your mother.’” And he answered and said to Him, “Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.” Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.” But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mk 10:17-20)

God’s prepared soil

In addition to this general guidance about where to look for good soil, we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead us to good soil where He has been preparing the ground to receive the word.

“He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the

boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;” (Ac 17:26-27)

“But whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the labourer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house.” (Lk 10:5-7)

Some important points arise from these scriptures:

- God has set the times and places for people to live so they might seek and find God: expect your family, neighbours, work colleagues and other acquaintances to have been placed in your circle by God so they might find Him.
- Go into people’s houses and families with the gospel. Don’t expect them to come to your church.
- Bring gospel peace and healing to a whole family, not just individuals.
- If a family receives you, build a close friendship with them.
- Don’t you go house to house; let the family do that, inviting their friends to share in their discovery.

If you can’t visit people in their houses, look for a place where people know one another, such as a club or popular café or local bar. ^{vi}

From Seed to Harvest

We share the gospel (sow the seed), God transforms a person’s life (brings growth), that person becomes an obedient disciple (bears fruit) and they minister Christ to others (we reap a harvest). Our place in this process is to be a friend and an example, teaching a new believer how to depend on Christ and His word through the Holy Spirit.

The kingdom grows by multiplying healthy disciples. ^{vii} If a person turns out to be poor soil we should encourage and challenge them with the Gospel and make them choose whom they will follow. If they do not rise to the challenge and follow Jesus faithfully, then don’t waste time on them. Look for better soil.

How can you keep things on track?

We must trust Jesus to be the head of His church and the Holy Spirit to lead and teach His children. To impose control over small groups and churches in order to ensure they conform to some pattern we have decided upon is to go beyond our remit as disciple makers.

Jesus was perfectly clear and un-phased that 3 out of 4 seeds may ultimately prove fruitless; that tares will grow up with the wheat; that false prophets will do mighty wonders without ever knowing Jesus; that talents will be given which are buried and that many will fall away. In the light of this we must trust Jesus with His church. Our attempts to protect what we have by hedging it about with rules only have the effect of stifling growth and development.

We should teach well, warn people who depart from the simplicity of the Gospel or who get ensnared by worldliness and pray for God's intervention. But in the end we must let go. In our care for the church we should not end up babysitting poor soils, but give ourselves to working with the good soil.^{viii}

A Pattern for Multiplication

Jesus' commission for discipleship implies multiplying disciples which leads to multiplying leaders and multiplying churches. Paul was obedient to this, moving quickly from one place to another leaving a trail of young churches behind him. Part of Paul's strategy was to maintain a simple pattern which he taught wherever he went:

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. (Phil 3:17)

Paul does not give us his pattern in a simple form, but it can be discerned from his letters, and is perhaps summarised by his repeated themes of faith, hope and love:

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1Co 13:13)

“remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,” (1Th 1:3)

“But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.” (1Th 5:8)

Works of faith – healing the sick and delivering people from the snares of the devil; labours of love – loving one another as Jesus loves us; patience of hope – living life out of our secure position in Christ. These are then DNA of our discipleship and should be in every aspect of our private and corporate church life.

Every disciple, every meeting, every ministry must have *all* the DNA at the same time^{ix}; works of faith, labours of love and patient hope in the sight of our God and Father.

Two other keys are seen here: firstly the leaders **MUST** set the example. If you are promoting Growth Groups for your people, it is essential that the leaders, including the pastor, are also in Growth Groups. Only those who experience the power of a Growth Group for themselves will be truly passionate about them. Secondly, you will discover new leaders as you “take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you”. Effective leaders will emerge from multiplying Growth Groups.

Evangelism

The missional life is: Make friends, Throw parties, Tell stories and Give gifts. Sounds both entirely possible and fun!^x

Disciples should look for good soil in which to sow the seed of the word. But what should we sow? How should we present the gospel? For decades the church has used tracts with a summary of the “gospel” for evangelism. These typically talk about the problem of our sin, the solution in the cross and a “sinners prayer”. Do you not think it strange that this “gospel” is not presented in this form anywhere in scripture. It is even stranger that this “gospel” cannot be easily derived from the four Gospels. We do well to heed the Gospel which the Holy Spirit has already designed for us: John said:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (Jn 20:30-31)

Those verses describe precisely what we are trying to achieve with our little tracts. It is time we followed the inspired scriptures rather than trying to improve on them with our selected verses. The reality is that unsaved people are not interested in the *means* of our salvation which our tracts try to explain. They need to hear genuine good news. The signs which John records are a powerful way of sharing that good news.

John selected seven *miraculous signs*:

1. Water into Wine (Jn 2:1-12)
2. Healing of official's son (Jn 4:46-54)
3. Healing of paralytic at Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1-17)
4. Feeding of 5000 (Jn 6:1-14)
5. Walking on the water (Jn 6:15-25)
6. Healing of man born blind (Jn 9:1-41)
7. Raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-46)

A method which has been found very powerful is to get a seeker to take one story a week and read it every day. Each week meet them and ask:

1. What does this tell us about people's character or nature?
2. What does this tell us about Jesus or God?
3. What does Jesus want to say to me personally?
4. Who does Jesus want me to share this message with?

Growth Groups

The building block of the church is 2-3 disciples in intimate relationship. Across the world very small Growth Groups, Discipleship Groups, Life Transformation Groups – call them what you like – have proved to be the essential foundation of multiplying churches.

With 4 or more, it is very easy for a person to drift into the background, or for sub-groups to form. Groups of 2-3 are the ideal size for both accountability and mission:^{xi}

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.” (Lk 10:1).

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:2-3).

See the *Growth Group Handbook* for details of starting and running Growth Groups.

ⁱ Parts of this section quoted from Organic Church, P54

ⁱⁱ quoted from Organic Church, P99

ⁱⁱⁱ quoted from Organic Church, P66

^{iv} quoted from Organic Church, P132

^v quoted from Organic Church, P71

^{vi} quoted from Organic Church, P177

^{vii} quoted from Organic Church, P98

^{viii} quoted from Organic Church, P69

^{ix} quoted from Organic Church, P118

^x quoted from Church 3.0, P206

^{xi} quoted from Church 3.0, P140