



Editor's Note

One of the beauties of local church autonomy is flexibility. While there are certain biblical methods and patterns the Lord has made clear, the fact of the matter remains there are many details the scripture does not specifically address.

We recognize there is some disagreement over which methods are Biblically mandated, allowed or precluded. Our goal is not to be controversial, but to stimulate and challenge elders both to think and to act. The sheep need shepherding. And leaders at times need boldness in their shepherding.

When we talk about "practical", then it should not surprise us that there will be diversity of practices. To put it simply, it is "OK" if local

churches look and, at times, function differently in some areas. Each local church (with their elders) must be convinced before the Lord of what they are doing and why?

This issue of ESN looks at the very subject of how to be practical in our ministry. As always, we pray the Lord will separate the wheat from the chaff so that what is from the Spirit would impact your hearts. Jack Spender's continuing series on small groups is especially close to my heart. I have been leading small groups for close to 30 years, and have seen the value of this over and over again. His fresh insights have been helpful to me.

We encourage you to use what is helpful for your ministry.



Biblical Foundations

So What?

by Chuck Gianotti

So what? That was a question my friend would ask any bible teacher who "waxed eloquent" with doctrine. The question was not irreverent—rather, it was pointed. Essentially, he was asking for help in application: "What difference does that truth make in my life? Tell me how it works." He was serious.

During the first few years of my Christian walk, I read repeatedly in scripture about confessing to one another (James 5:17), confronting in love (Matt 18:20) and forgiving one another (Matt 18:21-22). I even heard this taught from the pulpit at various times, but only in general terms--there were never any real life illustrations showing how to put

these truths into practice. I initially concluded, as a young believer, that no one really took those

Scripture was given to be applied.

verses literally, because I never heard it related to everyday life or saw it in action. Yet, clearly there was a fair amount of sinning against each other as believers. My initial efforts to put these truths into practice met with utter failure—misunderstanding and further conflict.

If there is one thing that should be pre-eminently assured, it is this: Scripture was given to be applied! Teaching in the local church should be both doctrinally sound AND realistically practicable. James 1:22 not only provides a mandate for the one hearing truth to be a "doer" of the word, but it also implies a mandates for the teacher of the word to help the hearer learn "to do" the word. It does no good to wash teaching over with a cursory benediction: "May the Lord apply this to our hearts."

Right doctrine needs to be taught

Lest anyone misunderstand my point, elders are right to insist upon biblically sound teaching of the Word of God, for we have no other foundation that can sustain the attacks upon the truth of God. Not for a

moment do I suggest that we in any way minimize such emphasis. Historically, the church has been under assault beginning as far back as the 1st century, soon after the church began. In the early part of the last century, the liberal/fundamental split brought the focus of believers to emphasize right doctrine, particularly as it related to the foundation of the Word of God. Churches and denominations divided over this. The "charismatic" movement in the 60's and 70's and it's recent manifestation in the so-called "3rd Wave" movement, has led many to migrate away from objective, sound doctrine.

These aberrations push into subjective experientialism fostered by disillusionment with modern rationalism. "Post-modernism" has become the catch word of our

times, signaling a move to a "neo-rational", pseudo-spiritual thinking which embraces religious pluralism. Doesn't that sound complicated? Yes—and if there was ever a time to stand firmly on simple, sound, biblical truth, that time is now! And thankfully, many churches are doing just that.

The teaching method of our Lord

At the same time, we note that our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom we ultimately derive our teaching methods, constantly applied His teachings to everyday life. He never proclaimed

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Leadership Principles

Small Group Ministry—Part 3

by Jack Spender

In the previous article, we looked at the goals of a small group ministry and suggested that true fellowship grows best in an informal environment. Now let's consider the basics of a workable plan for beginning some groups; something simple, practical and designed to meet needs while training younger believers. Three ingredients are essential: places to meet, good leadership, and a structure or format for the meetings.

First, homes make the best meeting places. Groups should be small; 5–8 are ideal. Once a group grows larger than 12 people, quiet ones may recede and cease to grow. Requirements for a host home should be minimal; adequate meeting space and parking, and a warm welcome. Make it clear that hosts need not be leaders. It's better to share responsibilities. If the group wants to emphasize outreach, it's fine to meet in the home of an unbeliever.

Second, good leadership is essential. Critics at times frown on the notion of people getting together to “just share.” But if leaders are prepared with a wise plan, small groups will

do much more than this. Actually, the ideal form of leadership is a couple, a husband-wife team (see Acts 18:26). Elders ought to encourage younger men to be group leaders and not seek to be leaders themselves. One of the goals is to lighten the workload of elders, not increase it. One very important part of the small group ministry is the monthly leader meeting. This is a time when the elders and leaders can meet, pray and plan together. They should discuss problems and opportunities, and coordinate the effort with the life and needs of the church.

Third, because the basic goal of the groups is to promote fellowship, flexibility in all meetings is a must. Plans must be adjusted to meet the needs of people. A simple format or pattern for meetings must be agreed upon and followed. I recommend the L,L,D,D format: love, learn, decide and do. This encourages the growth of the whole person, heart, mind, will, and body; not just the intellect. A typical meeting might begin with questions and interaction about how the members of the group are doing. Openness will require time to develop. If there are no unusual needs or problems, a planned lesson or study can be started. If cares or questions surface during the opening time (or during the study), the

planned material should yield to discussion and prayer centered around a search for Bible passages that instruct and encourage with regard to the need at hand. Time will prove that when the Bible is seen to be a truly living and completely relevant book by young believers, interest in worship and doctrine on Sunday morning will increase dramatically.

At some point, discussion should shift to decisions about how to serve those in need followed by a time of prayer and then simple refreshments with informal fellowship. Subsequent meetings should include some accountability to be sure things agreed to were in fact carried out. Don't neglect the “decide” and “do” parts. Options for content are limitless but all should be done to edify the believers (I Cor. 14:26)

Here are four key ingredients for a successful start drawn from years of experience with small groups:

1. Insist on good leadership. Elders must be unanimous about this effort or don't start! Group leaders must have a solid working relationship with the elders as well as a love for the Lord, the assembly, and the people.

2. Refer to the groups by names other than “Bible studies.” Choose names that emphasize the goal of fellowship such as home, care, shepherd, or fellowship groups. Remember that most Christians are educated far beyond their obedience. The need is for equipping and growing; for bearing burdens and reaching lost people.

3. Don't think of small groups as another “program”. Many believers are already over committed to assembly programs and cannot bear one more—even a good one. Better to view small groups as an essential part of the life of the church. In our assembly, one who is “in fellowship” will attend breaking of bread and teaching on Sunday, and then fellowship and prayer during the week. Programs, by contrast are optional and added to the schedule over and above these. It is exciting to see over 80% of the assembly in regular attendance at midweek meetings even after years.

4. Be flexible in planning and brief in meeting activities. If some are struggling with the idea of meeting in homes, meet once or twice a month in the traditional manner and during the other weeks meet in the small groups. Keep meetings moving along; don't get bogged down. Be sure to

start and end on time.

Finally; it's helpful to remember that the groups are little lights shining in neighborhoods where there may not be any assembly. Never let the intimacy of fellowship become so important that a visiting friend or neighbor feels unwelcome. It's fine to carry on the functions of the assembly family, but this can be done in such a way that a visitor comes to exclaim “surely God is among you....” (I Cor. 14:25). More than one new assembly has been started in this manner.

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From the Q-Files

The sad truth is that Christian leaders seem to be among those who most miserably fail [at forgiveness].

I wonder if we've forgotten that our forgiveness of others seems to be a condition of God's forgiveness of us. I do not understand how a group of elders, deacons and preachers of the Word can meet together and plan for the present and future of the body of Christ if there be among them men who have not forgiven one another.”

Bob Stacy (in Restoration Herald, Aug 2002, page 11), quotes in Current Thoughts & Trends, November 2002, p. 12).

ESN

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The Glorious 3x5

Do you find yourself making a commitment on Sunday morning to do something, only to find next Sunday that you forgot to do it? Often an elder may have a half-dozen things to remember to do: pray for a brother, call someone, confirm a meeting date, look up a bible reference for someone, get back to someone about something ... and the list goes on! Then, also, as you are listening to the sermon, people come to mind that are absent or sick and you must remember to visit them.

I have found that carrying a 3x5 card (dimensions may vary), a small notebook or even a folded up “to do” sheet, becomes a wonderful aid. I never travel without one. So when someone asks me to pray, I immediately pull out my card and write it down. This not only conveys to the individual that I really am going to pray, but it assures me that I will in fact remember to do it!

So What? (cont. from page 1)

sterile truth by itself. His goal was not to make people smarter—if that were the case, we should lock ourselves in monasteries. Our knowing and articulating truth is NOT the goal of teaching. Jesus said, “*You will know the truth*”, but he didn’t stop there. He continued in a very practical vein, “*and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:32). The goal is changed lives.

From the sermon on the mount (i.e. “turn the other cheek”) to the upper room discourse (i.e. “wash one another’s feet”), application abounds in scripture. The relevancy of the truth was the major emphasis of our Lord’s teaching. It was indeed relevant, because Jesus preached to change lives. He spent much of his time with the disciples showing them how the truth worked in their lives. For example, after teaching about faith, he led them out onto a soon-to-be stormy lake, for part two in this lesson on faith (see the context of Luke 8:22). His “small group” included both lecture as well as practicum.

Showing the relevancy of truth

A common saying is that “We don’t need to make the scripture relevant, it IS relevant.” True enough. But, we need to SHOW people that relevancy. If that were not the case, then we wouldn’t need teachers—the primary role of elders would be hand out Bibles and send people on their way.

However, in an atmosphere of believers committed to each other, we are taught and trained in dealing with life and in taking the truth out into the work place, the market place, our neighborhoods and our

homes.

Let’s bring this into sharper focus. Many churches focus on a narrow corpus of principles, with which they may accentuate their distinctiveness from other Christians groups. I’d like to suggest a distinctive that all gatherings of God’s people should have. A friend of mine put it this way, “Love is an assembly principle of gathering.” I would go on to say that it is THE most important characteristic of a biblical ordered local church (see John 13:35, 1 Cor 13:13). Love is, or should be, the ultimate distinctive, which is the pre-eminent application of truth. You see, *love* is an application word, a verb, not just an esoteric concept. It is an action concept, a verb. It cannot be contained in a doctrinal dissertation or kept bound in the pulpit with a false sense of mystery. It is real and tangible, like stopping by the side of the road to help someone beaten and left for dead (see Luke 10:25-36).

Truth and Love

What then is the relationship between right doctrine and love? Paul answers this in 1st Timothy: “*The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm*” (1 Tim 1:6-7). Although he may be referring to the specific command in the context, it is not a stretch to see it’s universal application to all commands.

He later had a plan for propagating the truth after he was gone: “*...the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others*” (2 Tim 2:2). He was concerned that the truth be taught by “faithful” men, so that it would remain firm and emphasized. But, notice the verse that precedes it, the context in which this teaching is to take place: “*You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*” (2:1). The teaching of truth was to be done in the context of “strong” grace. What does this mean? The teacher/discipler must have a clear understanding of the grace of God, not only as it was manifested in his salvation, but also as it is manifested and growing in his daily living. In all of Paul’s letters he includes “Grace to you” in the beginning. Peter adds, “Grow in grace ...” (2 Peter 3:18).

But, there is more. The teacher must saturate his teaching with grace, not only in how he teaches, but also in the content of his teaching—so that the truth is always set in the context of grace. In other words, the teacher/discipler should show how any particular teaching reflects God work in our lives and His gracious blessing through us. For it is only when the truth is held and shared in graciousness that the truth will bring about God’s desired application in our lives, that is, Love. That is His goal—and it should be ours, as well.

So, as elders, let us commit to both proclaiming the truth and applying it to our lives and our teaching, so that others may know and understand how it applies to their lives as well. 

Wives’ Corner

Accepted in the Beloved

by Ruth Spender

How would you rate the relationships in your assembly? Is there a genuine acceptance of one another or is there a need for a Sunday morning façade in order to measure up to some invisible standard? Some groups do a wonderful job at being real with one another. There is an air of openness and love where what is really going on in one’s life can be shared without fear of rejection, thus prayer for one another is more relevant and the unity of the saints is sensed by all who enter. Certainly, this is the type of assembly we would all like to be a part of. God has gifted women with being more relational than men, so we can play a huge part in developing an accepting atmosphere in our fellowships.

In thinking about the matter of acceptance, I came across a powerful, life-

changing concept in God’s Word. Early in our ministry, I struggled to know how to relate to an elder’s wife who clearly did not accept herself, for she did not like the fact that she was a woman. I observed the devastating effects this had not only on her daughter, who didn’t like herself, but on her husband and his ministry as well. Once when she offered to babysit for our young son, she told me she would not have offered if he had been a girl. I thought that was strange, but then I figured there are things that each of us would like to change about ourselves if we were given a chance. I really didn’t know how to respond to her.

The Lord had to teach me the difference between those things which we should strive to change in our lives (for God wants to see constructive change, too)

and those things which are a part of our lives by design intended to equip us to be the servants He would have us to be. While it may be right for us to seek to be more disciplined in some area of life or to work on being more outgoing or approachable as a person, God would not have us wishing that we were someone else or that we had been given a different family or past. Nor would He have us be discontent with our natural talents, the spiritual gifts or the ministry He has given us.

Ephesians 1:6 tells us that “he hath made us accepted in the Beloved” (KJV). The basis for our accepting ourselves is that God accepts us (with all our baggage) unconditionally. Over a lifetime He works to conform us into the image of His Son, but He does not require us to “shape-up”

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As an elder, you have probably spent countless hours listening to and studying the Word, in meditation and prayer. Unfortunately, this can render you ineffective in teaching new believers how to have a daily "quiet time." Your methods and length of study would overwhelm them. They need some guidance, in drinking the milk of the word. Some are natural students and can dive right in without help. But, many are easily discouraged and wrestle with guilt over their failure.

A profitable time with the Lord can be encouraged without it being overly complicated. A simple approach I heard about long ago has been helpful to both new and seasoned believers alike. Here is how I share it with others:

It is a good idea to begin every day with a quiet time spent with the Lord. Just like warming up for a sports activity, we need to warm up each day for life. This

may be a new concept or you may have heard of people who spend 30 - 60 minutes daily doing this and it scares you away. You think, "I could never do that!" A helpful way to have a short quiet time and one that can fit into anyone's schedule is the "PREP" method. PREP stands for preparation and it only requires five minutes a day. With just this short amount of time you can have an effective PREP time.

P - Pray (1 minute). Ask the Lord to settle you down and prepare your heart. Pray that He will help you understand and apply His word.

R - Read (1 minute). Read a short passage, as much as you can in one minute (no longer). You might read through consecutive selections in the Bible. For example you may want to work your way through a book of the bible, like the Gospel of John, reading 1 minute each day.

E - Evaluate (2 minutes). Ask ques-

tions in your mind such as: What does this passage mean? Who is talking? What does this passage say about God, man or the relationship between the two. How does this work in my life? Is there a command to follow? Is there something to appreciate?

P - Pray (1 minute). Pray again asking the Lord to help you apply what you just learned and to help you with your day. You may want to thank or praise Him for something you read or for what He is doing in your life. Five minutes a day equals 35 minutes a week which equals 30 hours in a year.

Can you spare five minutes each day? You may find that after a while, 5 minutes just isn't enough time. You can double the time to 10 minutes, by doubling each step. If you find yourself desiring to increase this time beyond this, you can multiple each step. Start tomorrow morning. Then do it each morning after. The blessings will be yours.

For more resources like this, check out www.bible-equip.com.



Accepted (cont. from page 3)

before He accepts us into His family. We show our understanding of these truths by the way we relate to ourselves and others.

As we accept these things about ourselves which we cannot change and commit to God the things we need to change, then we can thank Him that in His perfect plan He has allotted us "our portion", that is, He has determined our place in history, measured out our days, and given us the role He would have us to play. We will not be so quick to chafe under our perceived handicaps. We will also be more accepting of others who come into our lives and into our assemblies even though they may be very different from us. The Lord can help us

love others while He works to bring needed change into their lives through the power of the Word of God.

In the 70's my husband and I were heavily involved in a college ministry and we were so grateful for the way in which the saints, and especially the elders of our home assembly received these students on Sunday morning in their unconventional clothing and long hair. The believers loved them, prayed for them and invited them home for Sunday dinner. We all shared in the joy of seeing God change these kids from the inside out. Many of them settled down and were a tremendous blessing in the work, while others moved to other areas.

We learned from this experience that opportunities for outreach and growth are endless if people feel accepted. Not that we become tolerant of sin, but we seek to relate to the person the way Christ does.

Imagine the positive impact we could have on our husbands by accepting them unconditionally? As elder's wives we should make sure we are able to say before the Lord that we accept each believer God has placed into our lives. Then we will be in a position to help bring healing into those relationships which may be fractured as a result of an unwillingness to be accepting of others. We can only do this as we are secure in who we are in Christ—"accepted in the beloved."



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