

ATHENS COLLEGE OF MINISTRY

TOWARD A MORE BIBLICAL SMALL GROUP: A SCRIPTURAL ANALYSIS OF
CHRISTIAN MICRO-COMMUNITY AND COMPARISON OF MODERN SMALL GROUPS
TO THE BIBLICAL MODEL

MASTER'S THESIS

CS 691

FALL, 2019

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study purposes to observe and analyze the current, predominant expressions of Christian micro-community (small groups) and compare them to the biblical model for relational Christianity in order to determine if they are, and to what degree, they are aligned with the biblical model. The body of ecclesial literature seems to largely lack this important and relevant comparison. It was hypothesized that modern small groups largely fail to reflect the biblical model.

The study was limited to analyzing the descriptions of predominant types of modern small groups found in the literature, including internet resources. Biblical analysis was restricted to characteristics of Christian community described in the book of Acts and relevant passages in selected Pauline epistles. A major constraint of the study was the limited availability of thorough and detailed descriptions of known and recognized small group types. Another limitation was unobservable blended small group structures which exist and are no doubt relevant but which do not fit well into prevalent categories and are not described in literature nor other resources.

Qualitative analysis of available data found that modern small groups by and large fail to exhibit the majority of the biblical characteristics of Christian community. Further research is needed in this area, particularly quantitative study which will improve accuracy and relevancy by probing into and revealing biblical characteristics which are certainly present in small group models but are undescribed.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of what the modern church has come to call “small groups” is actually not a phenomenon at all. According to the scriptures, from the earliest days of the church small groups of Jesus’ disciples met in homes. These groups appeared, at least in many cases, to exist

and function outside of, or separate from, what the Bible calls *ekklesia* (assembly, gathering, congregation). Acts 2:46 refers to both worship in the temple and gatherings in homes as separate realities. Jesus' discipleship and ministry model centered around His small group of twelve disciples, a subset of His larger following of disciples (Luke 6:17). In the fledgling church, the Apostle Paul appeared to travel and minister with small groups of companions (Acts 19:29, et al.). In the reformation church, both John Calvin and John Wesley utilized small groups as effective structures for discipleship and evangelism. While small groups never completely disappeared from the church, interest in them resurged in America in the 1980's as the first megachurches were formed and suburbanization increasingly depopulated urban centers and depersonalized the small town/rural, close-knit, family-centered churches of the 1800's and early 1900's. While they have become firmly established in western *evangelico*, the question remains, and the dialog is ongoing about whether they reflect the biblical model.

Small groups are subsets of a larger gathered church. Their primary purpose is to create spiritual growth environments focused on developing and nurturing relationships that are part of the greater effort to grow and develop mature disciples of Jesus Christ through the process the Bible calls sanctification. Their chief attribute is that they do not exist and function separately from a "parent" church. To do so would classify them as churches themselves, a discussion of which is outside of the scope of this paper.

There are those who advocate the euthanization of church-based small groups. This seems to be driven by the idea, albeit a sweeping generalization, that small groups have largely become social gatherings which are basically ineffective at making disciples. Quoting a church growth consultant, Pastor Brian Jones had this to say about small groups in a 2011 article in *Christian Standard* magazine, "The problem is 90 percent of small groups never produce one

single disciple. Ever. They help Christians make shallow friendships, for sure. They're great at helping Christians feel a tenuous connection to their local church, and they do a bang-up job of teaching Christians how to act like other Christians in the Evangelical Christian subculture. But when it comes to creating the kind of holistic disciples Jesus envisioned, the jury's decision came back a long time ago—small groups just aren't working.”¹ Jones concluded that, “In my humble opinion, the Americanized small group is a remnant of an impotent religious institution that can't transition effectively into a post-Christian, postmodern world.”²

Despite opposition, it appears that small groups are here to stay and are a critical and integral part of the greater church's efforts to create and foster biblical Christian community. There is no question that the institution of the small group is a work in progress in most churches, an evolving reality fraught with false starts, mistakes, rebuilding and retrofitting. Their proliferation, and their many permutations, in the post-modern church begs the question: do current small group models align with the biblical example in structure, focus and function? Through study of New Testament scripture, primarily the Gospels and Acts, and analysis of predominant forms of small groups in the modern church, it will be shown that small groups have largely departed from the biblical model of relational discipleship and communal evangelism and are failing to effectively disciple believers and engage Christ-followers in fruitful evangelism.

Given the well-anchored reality of small groups in the western church, it is helpful to consider some of the concerns about them that have emerged over the last 30-35 years. Brian Jones summarizes some of them especially well. “With few exceptions,” Jones explains,

¹ Brian Jones, "Why Churches Should Euthanize Small Groups," Christian Standard, March 21, 2011, accessed May 02, 2019, <https://christianstandard.com/2011/01/why-churches-should-euthanize-small-groups/>.

² Ibid.

“modern-day small groups are great at producing Christians who sit in circles and talk to one another inside a building, people who read and comment on the Bible, people who rant about how they long to ‘get out there’ and do something that matters, people who awkwardly end their time by praying for ‘prayer requests,’ [and] people who go home unchallenged and unchanged.”³

There are some specific areas, some to which Brian Jones alludes, where small groups seem to depart from the biblical model. One of them is the misguided centrality of Bible study in the small group experience. “Small groups are not primarily intended for teaching and preaching,” says C. J. Mahaney in his book *Why Small Groups?* “Those functions,” Mahaney continues, “are the responsibility of your pastor,”⁴ implying that Bible teaching and study should not be the major focus nor central experience of small group meetings. Another is the emphasis on ministry and service projects rather than intimacy and connection. Author, pastor and speaker Jack Frost suggests that the church has developed a performance mentality with respect to community. This could be the result of the historic heavy influence of masculine leadership. Frost suggests that the focus on performance has weakened the church’s effectiveness, which is achieved through connection and relationships. “Could it be,” Frost asks, “that the Church has lost some of its authority and power...by putting a higher value upon the masculine qualities (building and producing) than upon feminine qualities (communion and intimate, connected relationships)?”⁵ Additionally, lack of accountability seems to be an unbiblical tendency in modern small groups. Accountability, biblically speaking, and in the context of Christian community, largely centers around confession and confrontation of sin. Christians are to be accountable to one another by confessing their sins to one another (Jas. 5:16). Modern small

³ Brian Jones, "Why Churches Should Euthanize Small Groups," Christian Standard, March 21, 2011.

⁴ C. J. Mahaney, *Why Small Groups?* (Gaithersburg, MD: People of Destiny International, 1996), 9.

⁵ Jack Frost, *Experiencing Fathers Embrace* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Pub, 2006), 131.

groups seem to have largely departed from this practice. For example, the Promise Keepers⁶ movement in the 1980's focused on accountability from the standpoint of keeping seven foundational promises, none of which directly confronted sin and sin patterns. George Barna has this to say about modern small group accountability, "Small groups may provide an environment within which accountability *may* [italics mine] occur, but our studies show that such accountability is superficial and uncommon."⁷ He suggests that fear of confrontation is possibly driving this trend.⁸ He goes on to say that, "There Is Virtually No Accountability for What We Say, Think, To or Believe [*sic*]."⁹ Finally, it seems as if true biblical fellowship (Greek *koinonia*) has morphed into something unrecognizable in modern small groups. "In its neglect," Mahaney says, "Christians have redefined fellowship to mean any warm human interchange – especially when we make connection with someone and discover that we have common interests, experiences and viewpoints."¹⁰ Quoting J. I. Packer, Mahaney suggests that self-sufficiency, formality, bitterness and elitism have contributed to the abandonment of biblical fellowship in modern small groups.¹¹ Related to fellowship seems to be the abandonment of the use of spiritual gifts in small group fellowship. Barna believes this to be the result of lack of teaching and resulting ignorance and misunderstanding. Fear may also be a factor, since, according to the Bible, spiritual gifts are activated and appropriated by the Holy Spirit. Barna's research found that, while the vast majority of believers polled have heard of spiritual gifts, half claim that they either do not know what their spiritual gift is or that God did not give them a spiritual gift, and

⁶ "The Seven Promises," Promise Keepers, 2019, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://promisekeepers.org/promises>.

⁷ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 92.

⁸ Luke Gilkerson, "10 Reasons Why Accountability in the Church Is Unpopular?" Covenant Eyes, June 11, 2015, , accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.covenanteyes.com/2013/07/15/10-reasons-why-accountability-in-the-church-is-unpopular/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ C. J. Mahaney, *Why Small Groups*, 18.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Gods Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 198-199, cited in C. J. Mahaney, *Why Small Groups*, 25.

25% indicated they had “spiritual gifts” that are positive personality and character traits but are not listed among legitimate spiritual gifts in the Bible.¹² Diana Bennett in her book *Renewing Your Church Through Healthy Small Groups*, citing results from a strategic study conducted at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, highlights some additional non-biblical tendencies that have invaded and hindered Christian microcommunity. Among them are secularism, self-reliance, and relational wariness [reserved and over-cautious].¹³

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Small groups seem to have been foundational in the expansion of the fledgling church. The New Testament specifically mentions house churches in a number of places (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3; Philemon 1, 2; Col. 4:15). House churches are implied or suggested in other locations including Philippi, (Acts 16:11–15, 25–34); Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9); Corinth (Acts 18:7, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 16: 15, 17); Cenchræe (Rom. 16:1, 2); Ephesus (Acts 18:18, 19, 26; 1 Cor. 16:19); Rome (Rom. 16:3, 5, 10, 11, 14, 15); and Colossæ (Philemon 1, 2). These upstart churches seemed to co-exist with larger *ecclesia*, which were referred to either as “temple” or by city name (Colossæ, Ephesus, Thessalonica, et. al.). Though no quantitative data exists on the size of these house churches, Robert J. Banks suggests an average of 30-35 people. “The entertaining room in a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably,” he says. Citing the fact that Eutychus was sitting on a windowsill during Paul’s gathering in Troas (Acts 20:9), he further offers that, “A meeting of the ‘whole church’ may have reached forty to forty-five people.”¹⁴

¹² George Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 74.

¹³ Diana Curren Bennett, *Renewing Your Church Through Healthy Small Groups* (Lexington, MA: LTI Publications, 2016), 8-9.

¹⁴ Robert J. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 35.

When the church coalesced into a state-sanctioned Roman institution during the fourth century C.E., house churches seem to have largely been folded into newly formed, large Roman Catholic churches. “With the rise of Constantine, house churches were no longer the primary meeting place for believers. There was little interaction between the priests and the people, and the church became progressively ritualistic,” points out Joel Comiskey in his book *2000 Years of Small Groups*.¹⁵ Small group structures, however, continued to exist, spread and thrive during the middle ages. Comiskey indicates that clergy formed small groups for mutual care during the time of Ambrose, bishop of Milan (339-397 CE).¹⁶ Itinerant cell groups of ten to twelve monks were known to have established churches in France and other parts of Europe during the 500’s CE.¹⁷

During the Renaissance period a number of small group-based movements formed in Europe. Gerard Groote (1340-1384) organized the *Brethren of the Common Life*, which over the next 100 years grew into a cell group-type organization made up of one hundred women’s house churches and over thirty men’s churches. In response to the choke hold of the Roman Catholic church on parishioners in the form of oppressive canon law, several preaching movements sprung up in Europe during the pre-reformation era. Among them were the Waldensians (formed by French merchant Peter Waldo in the late 1170’s), the Lollards (organized by British theologian John Wycliffe in the late 1380’s), and the Hussites (assembled by Czechoslovakian reformer Jan Hus, also in the 1300’s).¹⁸ These breakaway groups were the seeds of the Protestant Reformation because, in an anti-Catholic shift, they embraced priesthood of the

¹⁵ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups: A History of Cell Ministry in the Church* (Morena Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2014), 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

believer and *sola scriptura*.¹⁹ Their approach to community centered around house meetings. Waldensians shared a meal, prayed together, observed the Eucharist, worshipped and read scripture.²⁰ The Lollards followed a similar format with the exception of omitting the Eucharist.²¹ Hussites generally shaped their small group meetings around their interpretation of what they understood as the practice of primitive Christianity.²²

House church-type small groups appear to have re-emerged with gusto during the Protestant Reformation. Whereas during the centuries of the early Renaissance period Christian cell groups went underground in an environment of constant and severe persecution by the Catholic church, reformation small groups boldly stepped into the public arena. Allister McGrath in his book *Spirituality in an Age of Change* gives Martin Luther and John Calvin a great amount of the credit for the return of Christian microcommunity to the church. According to McGrath, Martin Luther, operating out of one his central goals of bringing scripture to laity and encouraging reflection/meditation, formed small groups for this purpose and to "...integrate their belief and behavior, their faith and their work."²³ Comiskey points out that while Luther initially was a strong advocate of house churches as a means of deepening the practice of faith, he later recanted and backed away from their implementation. According to a letter Luther wrote to a fellow priest in 1529 he "...did not believe that it was scriptural to separate from the church to set up a pure group of earnest Christians."²⁴ Comiskey surmises that, "Meeting in home groups was Luther's unwritten thesis which he believed, but failed to implement because of a

¹⁹ A Latin phrase (literally "by Scripture alone") describing the Protestant theological principle that Scripture is the final norm in all judgments of faith and practice. Robert Dean. Linder et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

²¹ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 73.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

²³ Alister Edgar McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change: Rediscovering the Spirit of the Reformers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 54.

²⁴ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 82.

spirit of caution, political considerations, and fear of losing the [reformation] movement to the Anabaptists.”²⁵ McGrath points out that John Calvin attempted to evangelize France by forming strategically-placed small groups who met regularly and focused on the study of scripture and prayer.²⁶ Both the Anabaptists and Puritans contributed to the greater church’s 14th century move toward microcommunity. Anabaptists in Germany formed lay-led, Bible-reading cell groups who gathered in homes. In defiance of the Anglican state church, Puritans gathered in small groups called conventicles²⁷ whose focus was discussing and applying scripture to daily life. Also called fellowship meetings, these groups spread throughout England.

John Wesley is frequently credited with re-establishing and permanently cementing microcommunity in the post-Reformation church. At the age of twenty six Wesley was an ordained Anglican priest, a tutor at Oxford University, and on a mission to “...redeem the nation [from the chokehold of the Church of England’s religious establishment] and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.”²⁸ In 1729, along with his brother Charles, Wesley formed and led a small group of students at Oxford nicknamed the “Holy Club” for its focus on personal holiness. In addition to Bible-reading the group’s spiritual regimen included “...regular periods of prayer, fasting, confession, and frequent partaking of the sacrament [Communion].”²⁹ While Wesley’s mission trip to America in the mid 1730’s was largely unsuccessful at evangelizing of the native Americans which were his focus, his voyage aboard the ship gave him a connection with a group, the Moravians, whose communal faith practices would later serve as a model for his incredibly successful small groups. The intimate relationships which they enjoyed and the

²⁵ Ibid., 85

²⁶ Alister McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change*, 55.

²⁷ Unlawful or secret religious gatherings.

²⁸ D. Michael. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books, 2016), 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

unshakable faith they displayed so greatly impressed him that he sought out Peter Bohler when he came to England as a missionary from Germany in the late 1730's.³⁰ Wesley had the opportunity to observe Bohler's small groups and was so influenced by their effectiveness that he, with Bohler's help, organized a group in London patterned after them which Wesley called the Fetter Lane Society.³¹ His connection to Bohler resulted in a trip to Herrnhut, Germany to observe the Moravian faith community, which had during the previous century emerged from the post-reformation Pietism movement. Many of their practices became the basis for the Methodist movement he later formed in England. "The movement that Wesley started was unique and thoroughly rooted in English society as a way to reform the Anglican Church and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."³²

There seems little disagreement among historians that Wesley's small groups provided the foundation for the reestablishment of relational community in the 18th and 19th century church. A disgruntled Wesley defied the leadership of the Anglican church and took the Gospel to the streets and villages of England during the mid-1700's. So convinced was he that discipleship was the key to biblical Christian living that he made small groups the core element of the Methodist movement. The interlocking structure that he designed and implemented was made up of three tiers: bands, classes and societies. Bands were the smallest groups, made of up three to five people. They were grouped homogeneously, according to age, gender and marital status. Their primary foci were transformation, social holiness and intimate fellowship through weekly confession of sin and prayer. Participation was optional.³³ Lack of pastoral oversight eventually led Wesley to create larger groups called classes, or class meetings.³⁴ They were

³⁰ Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker, *The Band Meeting* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017), 83.

³¹ Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 83.

³² Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 160.

³³ Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 14.

³⁴ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 170.

heterogeneous groupings of about twelve people. Participation was required and their purpose was accountability, stewardship, and edification through nurturing, which Wesley called “watching over one another in love.”³⁵ Class meetings, which were also called catechumen [groups],³⁶ additionally served as evangelistic gateways into Methodism, were highly structured, and were led by trained leaders. So revolutionary, important and effective were these discipleship groups in both the British Methodist movement and later American Methodist church that nineteenth century evangelist Dwight L. Moody said, “The class meetings are the best institutions for training converts the world ever saw.”³⁷

When Francis Asbury, Richard Wright and Thomas Coke brought Methodism polity from England to America in the late 1700’s and birthed the Methodist denomination, the class group meetings became a requirement for membership,³⁸ and emerged as a major catalyst for the phenomenal growth of American Methodism. From the beginning the American Methodist Church was structured around small groups. The momentum that micro-community had enjoyed beginning in earnest during the Reformation was interrupted by decline during the 1800’s following the deaths of John Wesley in England and Francis Asbury in America. Because Wesley, who “never concerned himself with church structure or polity,”³⁹ refused to separate the Methodism movement from the Church of England and give it its own identity as a church, his death removed the power of his personality and genius of his administration from critical oversight of the what he considered to be Methodist/Anglican small group structures. As a

³⁵ John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1989), 9:69, quoted in Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 26.

³⁶ From the Greek verb *katécheó* (Strong’s G2727), found in eight New Testament passages. It meant to “sound down,” or impart by nuanced repetition. By the mid-18th century the Latin verb *catechize* had been formed from it, which meant oral Christian instruction. From that verb came the noun *catechesis*, which referred to religious instruction, and those who participated in the catechesis groups were known as *catechumens*.

³⁷ D. Michael. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*, 20.

³⁸ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 189.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

result, the class meeting quickly devolved from the vehicle of discipleship and basis of membership Wesley had designed and implemented to an impotent fellowship structure⁴⁰ that operated separate from yet as a part of the Anglican church. In America, the construction of church buildings, which refocused people on activities and programs, coupled with the shift in emphasis from transformational relationship engagement to structured curriculum (i.e. Sunday School), “sealed the doom” of class meetings, and by the late 1800’s small groups had ceased to exist.

The death of Wesleyan small group structures was followed by the birth of the house church movement. Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary to China, is given credit for his pioneer work from 1895 to 1903.⁴¹ Observing that the disappointing results of the common missionary approach of his day, which “...depended upon white men on a ministerial salary to run mission organizations and establish churches,”⁴² Allen shifted focus toward forming mission churches that were indigenous, spontaneously-formed, organic and lay-led. Allen, in his book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours*, called his method “spontaneous expansion.”⁴³ Particularly noteworthy is Allen’s terse definition of spontaneous expansion as “something we cannot control.”⁴⁴ Comiskey points out that Allen’s work was little noticed, but that his approach was so revolutionary that it has become the de facto method for the modern, global house church movement’s spontaneous church multiplication work.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Wesley demanded accountability and insisted on trained leadership in the class meeting structure. His death removed oversight of these critical components, and class meetings ceased to result in transformational discipleship. It appears they quickly transitioned in to simple fellowship groups.

⁴¹ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 200.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1962), 142, in Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 200.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 201.

The small group structures that had dominated Christianity's renewed efforts at biblical community for nearly 400 years took on a new appearance at the turn of the 20th century: house churches. The house church movement of the 1900's centuries was centered around the principle that the small group IS the church, according to Larry Kreider. Kreider further notes that the house church movement manifests in two ways: the independent house church, and house church network. "They are called house churches because each one functions as a little church. They are networks because they work together to foster accountability and encouragement," he says.⁴⁶ In the 1950's house church planting movements begun in China, India, and Ethiopia thrived. All were largely based on Allen's *spontaneous expansion* approach and have been phenomenally effective at spreading the Gospel and establishing large numbers of permanent, thriving churches. Comiskey notes that while the traditional, conventional church in America continued to stagnate at the turn of the millennia, house churches at the same time experienced phenomenal growth and rapid replication and included as many as twenty million people.⁴⁷ Another permutation of the small group structure emerged in the late 20th century: the cell group. While the house church model more or less focused on the house as central, a Korean pastor named Yonggi Cho searched the scriptures and noticed the centrality of the small group itself rather than the location in which the small group met.⁴⁸ His approach was to parse large churches into home groups, or cell groups, that were not independent churches but groups which provided intimacy, discipleship and fellowship while under the "covering" of the mother church. This structure differed from Wesley's model because cell groups, unlike Wesley's classes and bands, were actually part of an organized church. Additionally, in Cho's model, the cell groups

⁴⁶ Larry Kreider, *House Church Networks* (Ephrata, PA: House to House Publications, 2001), 7, in Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 201.

⁴⁷ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 212.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 231-237.

tended to move together from house to house as cell members each opened their homes for meetings and shared extending hospitality to other cell members. Ralph Neighbor is credited with pioneering the cell-based church structure in America.⁴⁹ He was forty years old when he left a position with his denomination and planted a cell group-based church in Houston, Texas that served as a model for other American churches experimenting with cell groups. The cell church movement continues to mature and has initiated growing interest in the global community of faith in planting small, reproducible cell churches more aligned with the biblical model than are large, structured mega-churches.

SMALL GROUP MODELS

Small groups are as varied as the churches in which they reside, and there are many. Generally, they can be categorized in one of three ways: 1) affinity-driven (focused on interests or hobbies), 2) information-driven (focused on structured Bible study or curriculum), or 3) transformation-driven (focused on changed lives through relationships).⁵⁰ Small groups tend to be permutations of structures that have emerged from predominant micro-community pioneers in the western evangelical church over the last forty years. It is possible to generally group them according to categories, or models, that have emerged from the various churches where they developed and evolved. Dominant models include 1) open small groups, 2) closed small groups, 3) cell groups, 4) free-market groups, 5) neighborhood groups, 6) purpose-driven groups, 7) sermon-based groups, 8) organic small groups, 9) house churches, and 10) host groups.⁵¹ Within these models are varying characteristics including 1) size, 2) meeting frequency, 3) grouping

⁴⁹ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 235.

⁵⁰ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (And Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2013), 5-6.

⁵¹ Ryan Schaible et al., "Small Groups," *Small Groups*, 2019, accessed June 06, 2019, <https://www.smallgroups.com/build/models/>.

(heterogeneous vs. homogeneous), 4) mobility (mobile vs. static), 5) major meeting foci, and 6) reproducibility. Common meeting size categories are groups of three to seven, eight to twelve, thirteen to twenty, and greater than twenty. Common meeting frequencies are weekly, bi-weekly and monthly. Groupings include separation by age, gender, marital status, demographics or some blending thereof. Groups either meet in the same location each time, or move about, frequently among the homes of the members. Major meeting foci include fellowship, Bible study, service, pastoral sermon reflection, prayer, confession of sin, and outreach. “Fellowship” is a broad and loosely defined focus category, the meaning of which can range from recreation on one end to “doing life together” (DLT).⁵² communally on the other end. This paper will focus only on the models and highlight one church that embodies each model as an example. No attempt will be made to shift focus to analyzing widely recognized megachurches and how they implement the various models. Traditional Sunday School is not included as a model because it omits significant biblical elements that must be present for gathered believers to be considered relational small groups. Models will be presented with general descriptions along with their attributes according to as many of the aforementioned characteristics as is possible to obtain.

⁵² A term used frequently in churches with small groups. It means to gather informally to eat, fellowship, recreate, help each other, and generally share life’s experiences day in and day out. Acronym not a part of the citation. The phrase originated in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), 26.

OPEN SMALL GROUPS

Open small groups' major characteristic is their openness. Their primary focus is outreach and inclusion, and they often serve as significant evangelistic tools of churches who use them. They typically include eight to twelve members. There are no specific rules for grouping; they can be found grouped by gender, marital status, and age. They can either meet in a single location or shift locations. They can either "close" once they reach a specified number of participants, or they can divide and continue to replicate. Their openness is conducive to growth, but intimacy is often compromised. Because evangelism and outreach are the major foci of these groups, developing and nurturing relationships is secondary to their purpose and often neglected, as is ministry within the groups. Relationships tend to be rather superficial, and lack of emphasis on teaching weakens discipleship growth. Prayer is typically included but is often focused largely on intercession for unbelievers. Wesleyan-type "class meeting" groups would most likely fall into this category, largely because their size, heterogeneous groupings, and the fact that they are "open" to new believers. In churches where they are utilized, new Christians, and sometimes regular attenders who may not yet come to faith in Christ, are immediately inserted into one.

CLOSED SMALL GROUPS

Largely THE polar opposite of open small groups, closed small groups address the intimacy struggle that occurs in their open counterparts. The primary focus is relationship development. They tend to excel at discipling through relationship and accountability. Intimacy and transparency are the goal, the means, and the expected outcome. Once they are established, they generally do not accept new members for a period of time, often predetermined in length. Their strength is in building and fostering relational community. They require a high level of

commitment, and members are inclined toward intense loyalty to the groups. The deeply relational nature of closed small groups results in a greater propensity toward homogeneous grouping along the lines of age, gender and marital status. They also have a penchant toward smaller group size. One of their greatest risks is the inclination to become inwardly focused, which can result in the development of cliques and attitudes of exclusivity. Wesleyan-type band groups would most likely fall into this category, due in large part to their small size and focus on deep, intimate relationships.

CELL GROUPS

The distinguishing attribute of cell groups is that they are viewed as the basic unit of the churches in which they exist. "...the cell is the church, and the church is the cell," explains Ralph Neighbor. Everything in the church centers around the cells, and the parent church is simply there to provide support for the cells. "It is the basic building block of the larger community called 'local church.'"⁵³ They typically have between five and fifteen members, hold regular weekly meetings, and also gather informally in between meetings to DLT. Their primary components are 1) worship, 2) edification, 3) relational evangelism, and 4) discipleship.⁵⁴ Cell groups offer the advantage of robust discipleship training while fostering intimate relationships. They are replicating groups, due largely to their intentional, focused efforts in relational evangelism. Church culture is relatively easy to develop in the cell group model. Their independent nature, the high value placed on them, and their elevated status in church leadership and ministry hierarchies predisposes them to become isolated, withdrawn, and self-reliant, which can undermine the church's efforts to maintain doctrinal stability and uniformity. In spite of

⁵³ Ralph Neighbor. *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1990), 68-69 in Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 235.

⁵⁴ Ryan Schaible et al., "Small Groups," *Small Groups*, 2019, accessed June 28, 2019, <https://www.smallgroups.com/build/models/?type=close-groups>

their commitment to sharing life experiences, their rigid structure emphasis on growth and evangelism can actually suppress growth in intimacy.

FREE-MARKET GROUPS

Free-market groups tend to function as “bait,” drawing people into them who share particular interests, hobbies, or similitudes. They have been labeled “free-market” because of the principle of natural selection; that is, they will rise and fall, live and die, with the whims and interests of the group members. Also called interest groups, their goal is to shift the group from a worldly focus toward a functioning spiritual community through spiritual disciplines and relationships. These groups seem to appeal to independent-minded people who want choices and a smorgasbord of groups to select from. Because they appeal to preexisting interests, they are easy to form and organize. The lack of intense discipleship training on the front end makes the groups appear less “threatening.” They are usually balanced between relationship development and evangelism, and evangelism has proven quite effective due to the magnetism of common interests. Because of their secular basis, they can be anemic in discipleship and spiritual formation. They also have a proclivity for being transitory, which can weaken intimacy and connectedness within the group.

NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS

Neighborhood groups, as the name implies, are the geographically structured groups whose primary focus is relationships and DLT. Their structure frequently lends itself to formation in elementary school districts. Because they are geographical, they are less likely to include “commuters” who might travel some distance to participate for the sake of a particular individual or small group leader. They can have an “Acts Church” feel to them (Acts 2:42-47) and are appealing to those seeking a first century church experience. Because proximity is their

foundation, small group participants can experience a greater sense of shared community and belonging on an ongoing basis. Because they are geographic and relational, these groups tend to be tight knit and intimate. Depending upon the size of the parent church, large numbers of these can be scattered across a large area with the result being a challenge to manage and administer. Because they can be outliers both in structure and function, they can also detract from the sense of churchwide community. Neighborhood groups often embrace relational evangelism as their preferred approach to sharing the Gospel.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN GROUPS

Purpose-Driven groups emerged out of Rick Warren's ministry at Saddleback Church. Their unique feature is their focus on a five-point model: fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship. Robust growth as disciples of Christ is their prime directive. These groups don't depend on multiplication (splitting groups) for growth but on the church-wide campaigns for which Saddleback Church is known. In this structure, the leadership pool is greater because new leaders are initiated as hosts with lower expectations of training and experience. This tendency can be risky because leaders can take on the role unready for the responsibility, and the lack of oversight can result in leaders who actually are not disciples of Jesus themselves. The heavy dependency on campaigns creates some problems, including increased administration for churches and staffs and high turnovers as groups form and disband.

SERMON-BASED GROUPS

This common small group structure centers around the pastor's message and the worship service. Either using the church's curriculum developed from the pastor's sermon notes for the week or questions put together by group leaders, the group members reflect on the scripture passage and topic. There is usually a theological component and then discussion about

application. While this small group model excels in plumbing the depths of the scripture and message, there is little to no emphasis on either relationship development or evangelism. A sense of church-wide unity and common purpose, however, does emerge from this format. There are challenges with logistics. The pastor must finalize his sermon each week far enough in advance that small group materials can be developed. Also, rather than focusing on relationship development and discipleship growth, group time can actually result in a Bible study becoming a critique of the sermon or a theological debate.

ORGANIC SMALL GROUPS

Organic small groups can be considered polar opposites from sermon based small groups because they eliminate nearly all structure. The purpose is to foster spontaneous community that proponents claim will naturally develop when gathered without a structure. Meetings tend to center around prayer, spontaneous worship music, testimonies and impromptu devotionals. Relationship development is the prime focus. It has been said that these groups are "...a reaction against highly programmed and structured models of community."⁵⁵ Advantages are they foster intimate community and also demonstrate a greater tendency to be "Spirit-led" in an environment where people minister in ways that complement their spiritual gifts and passions. It is sometimes the only effective alternative to those who shy away from more structured, traditional small groups. Because of the organic nature of the groups, no intentional effort is made to organize them church-wide nor route new church members into them. They can also lack accountability due to their lack of organization and programming.

⁵⁵ Ryan Schaible et al., "Small Groups," Small Groups, 2019, accessed June 28, 2019, <https://www.smallgroups.com/build/models/?type=close-groups>

HOUSE CHURCHES

House churches can be considered a “next step” up from cell groups, which maintain their attachment to and fall under the authority of their parent church. House churches, on the other hand, are typically autonomous, do not fall under the authority of a parent church and function independently. Comiskey actually sees two separate expressions of house church. “The house church phenomenon has primarily taken on two manifestations,” he says. “First, there is the independent house church. The second is shaped by a network mindset.”⁵⁶ The network mindset to which he refers manifest loose networks with similar beliefs or other commonalities for the purpose of, for example, larger worship gatherings or ministry/outreach events. House churches represent a return to what many believe are the ideals and the model of the New Testament church, although their place and significance in the first century *ekklesia* is not completely clear. They also represent departure from, even to the point an exodus from, the institutionalized church. In 2001 Kreider estimated that forty-eight churches were closing per day in America,⁵⁷ while Barna pointed out in 2006 that an estimated seventy million Americans had participated in house churches experientially and twenty million Americans actually attended house church gatherings on a regular basis.⁵⁸ DLT inasmuch as is possible in today’s western culture is their chief strength and “selling point.” House churches offer something that appears to be unique in today’s various small group structures: intergenerational ministry. House churches tend to be heterogeneous with regards to age, and as such provide opportunities for relationship development across generational lines. Their definite strengths lie in the areas of

⁵⁶ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 201.

⁵⁷ Larry Kreider, *House Church Networks* (Ephrata, PA: House to House Publications, 2001), 7, in Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, 213.

⁵⁸ George Barna, "House Church Involvement Is Growing," Barna.com, June 19, 2006, , accessed July 26, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/house-church-involvement-is-growing/>.

individual accountability, trust and intimacy. Areas of concern for house churches include lack of doctrinal accountability and oversight, which can lead to heretical teaching and possibly extremism, limited access to ministry funding opportunities, and inexperience or untrained leaders who do not handle difficult situations and people well.

HOST GROUPS

Host groups appear to be an attempt to foster biblical community without going to initial the time and expense of training leaders. Churches who embrace this model recruit “hosts,” ecclesial logisticians who are willing to provide a location for, set up and run gatherings without taking on the responsibility of spiritual leadership. These groups initially use pre-packaged curricula and DVD-based teaching and used pre-printed guided questions for discussion. Hosts who prove to be successful in gathering and conducting group meetings are often invited to training sessions that help them to become true small group leaders who provide spiritual leadership. These quick-and-dirty small groups are easy to form and give prospective leaders a non-intimidating entry point into small group leadership. The downside is that hosts can be recruited who are not well-suited for true leadership roles yet become entrenched in the position, resulting in small groups that never move beyond pre-packaged curricula. They also tend to be fluid and can sometimes difficult to establish with any level of reliability. Even though high quality instructional DVD’s can provide sound teaching experiences, the possibility exists of using poor quality or questionable materials that perpetuate theological error or false doctrine.

WESLEY GROUPS

Among the newest models of small groups are those that have re-emerged out of John Wesley’s eighteenth-century Methodist movement. Early in his evangelistic career Wesley recognized the essentiality of a discipleship structure in order for spiritual transformation

(Romans 12:2) and conformation to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) to occur. He was so convinced of this that he said, “Never omit meeting your Class⁵⁹ [meeting] or Band⁶⁰ [meeting]; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our [Methodist] Society⁶¹; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community.” Wesley class groups and band groups were well defined and delineated according to the cultural and ecclesial contexts of both England and America in the 1700’s. Today’s denominations with Wesleyan theological roots, such as the United Methodist Church and Church of the Nazarene, have taken this early model and modernized it to fit better into a postmodern context. They are unique among small groups in the sense that they insist upon and foster depth in both deep personal spiritual life and intimate community life. They emphasize accountability, transparency and empathy. While they can be structured in different ways, their common element is the inclusion on one or more “transformational” questions that each person is encouraged to answer in turn. Examples might be, “How is your spiritual life,” or “How is your relationship with Jesus,” or “What did you struggle with this past week.” Wesley groups foster intimacy, community and growth in personal holiness, but the transparency, openness and raw honesty can seem threatening to new members and can actually lower small group participation. They can be considered weak in the area of teaching since they often do not include in-depth Bible study but only devotional

⁵⁹ Begun in 1742 in England, they were small groups of about 12 people, grouped homogenously, the purpose of which was to “To see each person in his [leader’s] class once per week at least; in order to receive what they were willing to give toward the relief of the poor; To inquire how their souls prosper; To advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require.” John Wesley, “General Rules,” in John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (repr.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 9:69-70, quoted in Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (And Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2013), 22-24.

⁶⁰ Begun in 1738 in England, they were small groups of about 4 people, divided by gender, age, and marital status. Their purpose was to “meet together once per week to confess their faults one to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed.” Its basic activity was to be confession of sin, the scriptural foundation of which is found in James 5:16. Kevin M. Watson, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community* (Franklin, Tennessee: Seedbed Publishing, 2017), 84.

⁶¹ The term used by the early Methodist church to refer to itself holistically. The modern equivalent of this term would be “denomination.”

activities. They are not service nor evangelistic in focus, which can discourage people with a strong sense of mission from participating.

BIBLICAL PROFILE

The Bible includes two foundational passages plus a number of snapshots of Christian community. While some of these can be found in the Old Testament, such as Moses forming leadership groups and appointing capable leaders (Exodus 18:21-26) and communal groups of prophets (1 Samuel 19:18-24; 2 Kings 2, 4:38-44), this paper on small groups will limit its analysis of biblical community to the New Testament. Jesus was the pioneer in the formation of Spirit-centered relational community. While other leaders clearly had disciples, including John the Baptist, Jesus gave new meaning and definition to relational community. Jesus' disciples never fully grasped that He was God Himself, and as such were being given a model of Christian community by the actual creator of relationships and community. Jesus' biblical model for micro-community can be found in the Gospels, but not all in one place. In the story of the early church in Acts there are two foundational passages: Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37. These will provide the basis for comparison with today's Christian micro-community. Scattered throughout the Epistles we find snapshots of Christian community which, when combined with Jesus' model and the model of the Acts church provide a clearer understanding biblical community that can be applied to today's small groups. The Gospels in particular contain many subtleties and nuanced characteristics of community. Because of the limited length of this paper, these will not be considered. Characteristics of small groups that are evident in Jesus' ministry will be limited to general attributes found throughout the Gospels.

Acts 2:42-47 provides the most vivid and concise description of Christian communal living in the New Testament.⁶² In this passage we see the following specific elements: 1) teaching, 2) fellowship,⁶³ 3) table fellowship,⁶⁴ 4) prayer, 5) sharing, 6) generosity, 7) evangelism, 8) unity and 9) fear (awe).⁶⁵ Acts 4:32-37 echoes and reinforces these same characteristics with one exception. The unity expressed in Acts 2:46 is conveyed by the use of the Greek adverb ὁμοθυμαδὸν (transliterated *homothymadon*) and describes unity in *action*, or unity in *behavior*.⁶⁶ The use of the Greek nouns καρδία (*kardia*, or heart)⁶⁷ and ψυχή (*psyche*, or soul)⁶⁸ in Acts 4:32 suggest intrinsic unity, or a *state* of unity, that emerges out of a personal relationship with Jesus. These three terms together suggest that believers were unified through inherent unity which manifested in the form of unified behavior.

A survey of the Gospels reveals that Jesus' micro-community of the twelve disciples 1) spent significant, continuous time together, 2) were accountable to Jesus and each other, 3) shared leadership responsibilities, 4) were empowered for ministry, 5) were commissioned for evangelism, 6) were apostolic (sent), and 7) were given opportunity to debrief following

⁶² The use of this term in this paper does not refer to secluded, separatist existence but to that which relates to or is done by a like-minded, close-knit, action-oriented community of the followers of Jesus Christ.

⁶³ Greek κοινωμία (transliterated *koinonia*). Strong's concordance reference G2842. A feminine noun which means *participation, communion, fellowship*. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga TN: AMG Publishers, 1994), 873.

⁶⁴ Biblical scholars do not agree on whether the Greek used in this passage (κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου) refers to the Eucharist or to ordinary meals, which Jude calls *Love Feasts* in his Epistle (συνευχόμεαι, *syneuōcheomai*, Strong's G4910, Jude 1:12). Schnabel suggests the possibility that this refers to both. "The 'breaking of bread' is best understood as a reference to the ordinary meals that the believers regularly shared, during which they remembered Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and for the establishment of the new covenant, linked with the command to remember Jesus and his sacrifice during meals (cf. Luke 22:14-22). In the church in Corinth, and probably in other churches as well, the Lord's Supper was commemorated in connection with ordinary, regular meals that the believers shared (1 Cor 11:17-34). When the bread was broken at the beginning of the meal, Jesus' words "this is my body, which is for you" would be remembered. After the meal, in connection with wine being served, Jesus' words "this cup is the new covenant in my blood" would be spoken. In Acts 2:46-47 Luke clarifies that these meals took place not only in private homes but also in the temple precincts." Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) Kindle Edition, 4986.

⁶⁵ Schnabel points out that the Greek word φόβος (*phobos*, Strong's G5401) used in Acts 2:42 can be rendered *panic, fear or terror*, but can also mean *reverence, respect, or awe*. He says, "Since Jesus did not perform miracles of judgment, we can assume that the apostles did not perform miracles in which people were harmed; thus the meaning 'respect, awe' should be used here." Schnabel, *Acts*, Kindle Edition, 5025.

⁶⁶ Strong's Concordance reference G3661. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 1040.

⁶⁷ Strong's Concordance reference G2588. *Ibid.*, 819-820.

⁶⁸ Strong's Concordance reference G5590. *Ibid.*, 1494-1495

ministry. Other attributes of community that are evident in Jesus' ministry include trust, forgiveness, encouragement and support.

Imbedded in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth are five aspects of fellowship that are significant, four of which are not found in the aforementioned Acts passages. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 are found 1) worship,⁶⁹ 2) teaching,⁷⁰ 3) a revelation,⁷¹ 4) a tongue [message],⁷² and 5) an interpretation [of a tongue message].⁷³ Additionally, Paul included in his first letter to Timothy four attributes of community. In 1 Timothy 4:13-16 are found 1) public reading of scripture, 2) exhortation,⁷⁴ 3) teaching, and 4) ministry using spiritual gifts.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Psalm. The Greek word used is ψαλμός (*psalmos*). It can literally refer to citing, singing, or chanting from the Hebrew psalter, or it can denote the striking of chords of a plucked musical instrument like a harp, or it can signify 'one who has it in his heart to sing or recite a song...' "G5568 - *psalmos* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G5568&t=ESV>

⁷⁰ Teaching. The Greek word used is διδασχί (*didache*). Generally refers to the oral impartation of doctrine '...which has God, Christ, the Lord, for its author and supporter.' "G1322 - *didachē* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G1322&t=ESV>. It is unlikely that it referred exclusively to teaching in the Jewish tradition, which involved expositions of Mosaic law and prophetic writing from the Jewish Tanakh or Septuagint. The more likely content would be a blending of law-centered wisdom and instruction from the Tanakh as well as stories and parables from Jesus' life plus grace-centered truths from apostolic ministry as the new covenant *ekklesia* emerged and coalesced into a movement.

⁷¹ Revelation. The Greek word used is ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*), which literally means "unveiling." It refers to 'a disclosure of truth, instruction, concerning divine things before unknown — especially those relating to the Christian salvation — given to the soul by God himself, or by the ascended Christ, especially through the operation of the Holy Spirit.' "G602 - *apokalypsis* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G602&t=ESV>. It likely referred to what has come to be known as a *prophetic word* in modern charismatic circles.

⁷² Tongue. The Greek word is γλῶσσα (*glossa*). "G1100 - *glōssa* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G1100&t=ESV>. While the word is frequently used in the New Testament to denote simple speech, the use of this word in Acts and Pauline writings almost exclusively refers to the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, or messages conveyed through Spirit-led utterances that were untellable apart from an interpreter. This was considered to be a manifestation of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost and imparted supernatural spiritual gifts to followers of Jesus. Considering Paul's consistent use of the word to refer to the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, we should conclude this to be the case in this passage, understanding that this gift appears to have been a fundamental, foundational, and consistent part of the early *ekklesia* experience.

⁷³ Interpretation. The Greek word used is ἐρμηνεία (*hermēneia*), which literally means translation or explanation. As used in the context of this passage, it appears to refer to a translation of the 'tongue' previously mentioned, which would be needed if voiced in assembly. The word is used only one other place in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:10) and refers to the spiritual gift of interpretation of tongues (*glossa*). "G2058 - *hermēneia* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G2058&t=ESV>.

⁷⁴ Exhortation. The Greek word used is παράκλησις (*paraklēsis*). While the word has a fairly broad semantic range, as used in this context it refers to Spirit-powered encouragement. The Greek word is found listed among the spiritual gifts in Romans 12:8. "G3874 - *paraklēsis* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G3874&t=ESV>. It is further likely that Paul refers here to prophetic ministry, or the intentional use of the gift of prophecy to encourage. The word is found in 1 Corinthians 14:3.

⁷⁵ The Greek word used is χάρισμα (*charisma*). While theologians differ on whether Paul is referring to the actual gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, or to specific spiritual gifts He imparts to followers of Jesus, the word is clearly linked to spiritual gifts and is found in the list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. "G5486 - *charisma* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (ESV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 4 Oct, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G5486&t=ESV>

Taken as a whole, these New Testament characteristics of the early church provide rich detail that paints a picture of unique, vibrant, transformational, life-giving, Spirit-powered, and intensely relational community. The passages and references include both stated and implied features, explicit and implicit properties, and overt and covert behaviors. In order to effectively evaluate modern micro-community in churches with regards to biblical characteristics, it is necessary to combine common traits. A combined list includes twenty-two different identified attributes. One notable omission from the list of biblical characteristics is discipleship. While the early church fathers instituted catechesis training⁷⁶ to help followers of Jesus in their sanctification journey, and even had teaching documents such as the Didache⁷⁷ which were based on Scripture, the infant church did not seem to have a concept of discipleship training as an intentional effort or focus. It appears that simple immersion in ecclesial community as described in the Scriptures served the purpose of making and maturing disciples without the need for programs or initiatives.

ANALYSIS

Not all categories that represent biblical characteristics of Christian community could be observed in this qualitative study. Unobservable categories were eliminated prior to data analysis because they were neither stated nor implied in the descriptions. The following eight

⁷⁶ *Catechesis training* is an ancient and largely archaic term for religious instruction or indoctrination. It is typically associated with Catholicism. The modern name *discipleship training* has largely replaced it. From the Greek word *κατηχέω* (Strong's G2727), which means *to instruct orally*. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 1040.

⁷⁷ Didache (Διδάχη, Didachē). Also known as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, and known more fully as “The Teaching (Διδάχη, Didachē) of the Lord to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles.” It was an early Christian text dating to the first or second century AD that contains instructions about moral conduct and liturgy. Although viewed as noncanonical, the Didache did have some level of authority in the early church and is part of a collection known as the Apostolic Fathers. “Lexham Bible Dictionary,” Logos.com (Faithlife, 2019), https://app.logos.com/books/LLS:LBD/references/bk.%Dibon_Place?layout=one&tile=left&zzls=1Ynd0YwKkCW2zbQYlekFmQF2+y3INCv6e9Dr3IMFFP2leLAM/0FHbl4rMoed8nsl8xEQyEWfM7WKRqznR+mSP+fLpIagwnn4cLHX9NSICEvRXYBTgAdN4fMqvoi8OKEYst5PisBuM8SURwDHx9fRUSyYbsrCj/NDxU37oe7g6l9h7hJt+kWIPVVegzESUZPxLIVndKLiPeOYWkRk1IX3sFmJUJI+SWwruer2KSDColisQIWCwNvOXXqwr2HkblAAC8

categories were removed from the data table (Appendix A) of twenty-two characteristics: 1) Debrief (following ministry), 2) shared meals, 3) sharing (possessions), 4) generosity, 5) awe, 6) revelation, 7) tongues and 8) interpretation (of tongues).

Fellowship is the only biblical characteristic that was observed in all ten small group models. One category, evangelism, was found in six, or 42.8 percent of the models (Appendix B). Time together and worship appear in three, or 21.4 percent of the small group models. Seven categories, representing fifty percent of the characteristics, were found twice. These were accountability, shared leadership, apostolic, teaching, prayer, exhortation and ministry using spiritual gifts. Three categories appeared only once in the model descriptions: empowerment for ministry, unity and Scripture-reading. These observations reveal a high preference among the models for fellowship, evangelism, spending time together (continuous and significant), and worship.

The small group model that demonstrated the largest number of biblical characteristics was the house church, in which was observed six (42.8 percent) of the categories. These categories were accountability, shared leadership, evangelism, fellowship, worship and exhortation. The lowest number of characteristics was found in the organic model, in which only two categories (14.2 percent) were observed. Cell groups and purpose-driven groups exhibited five (35.7 percent) of the characteristics. Three models, the open, closed and free market models, demonstrated four (28.6 percent) of the biblical characteristics. Finally, in the neighborhood, sermon-based and host groups were found three (21.4 percent) of the categories.

Acts 2:42 has traditionally provided for the church the ideal for Christian community, the *vexillum primaria*⁷⁸ by which properly constructed and conducted *ekklesia* is measured. The

⁷⁸ Latin: *primary standard*

four characteristics listed in Acts 2:42 supply the superstructure for community. If all other aspects of community were to be eliminated, these four would need to be present in order to comply with the biblical ideal. Since the third characteristic listed in the verse, the *breaking of bread*⁷⁹, was not specifically observed in the data⁸⁰, it cannot be included in the analysis. If the remaining three elements are isolated and observed separately, it is quickly evident that none of the small group models exhibit all three of what could be considered the bare minimum of teaching, fellowship and prayer. Open, closed and sermon-based small group models were the only ones which demonstrated two of the three primary standards, representing 33 percent of the models observed.

It is clear that no small group model contains more than fifty percent of the list of biblical characteristics. Combining models reveals that forty percent of the models demonstrate less than twenty five percent of what the Bible specifically lists as characteristics of Christian community. Seventy percent of the models exhibit less than one third of the biblical characteristics.

CONCLUSION

For over twenty centuries the *ekklesia* of Jesus Christ has spread, expanded, undulated, advanced, and receded in our world, always encroaching upon a Christless and hopeless humanity. It has at times morphed, even mutated, under the hand of men determined to control and orchestrate its manifestations, impacts and outcomes. For the first three centuries following the death of Jesus the church appears to have largely adhered to the biblical model, those attributes which are listed in the scriptures and considered are in this paper. The institutionalization of the church and establishment of Christianity as the Roman state religion

⁷⁹ For a discussion of the Greek phrase κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου (*breaking of bread*) used in Acts 2:42, see footnote 64.

⁸⁰ It is conceivable that the *breaking of bread* is implicitly included, and therefore not separately observable, in an undetermined number of the small group models.

created a starting point for hundreds of years of experimentation resulting in a variety of ecclesial configurations, most of which bore little resemblance to the book of Acts. While in nearly every century following the reformation large scale revivals and awakenings have sprung up around the world resulting in surges of spiritual transformation and radical return to godliness, the institutional nature of the church has remained largely unchanged. If anything, it has become even more structured and entrenched thanks to modern technology and an increasingly global community.

In the post-modern church, many and widespread attempts have been made over the last forty years to realign Christian community with the biblical model. The question might be asked, “Why is this realignment even necessary?” The trend toward small groups, it must be pointed, is a phenomenon of the “western” church,⁸¹ and beyond that, the “cold-climate”⁸² church of northern Europe and northern Asia. It is not readily seen in the “hot-climate”⁸³ church in Africa, southern and southeastern Asia, or Central and South America. This is important to note, because cultures that are by nature relational have relational churches that reflect their relational cultures. They don’t need nor embrace intentionally organized small groups because community is intuitively formed in the church as it is in the culture. They have largely retained their relational structure because they never lost it in spite of the early institutionalization of Roman Catholic church which spread worldwide as Roman Catholicism proliferated. The institutional nature of the Catholic church, rather than the relational nature of the biblical church, is what spread along with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it expanded north, west, and even east into eastern Europe and northern Asia including Russia. A large part of the struggle of the western church to relearn how

⁸¹ That is, the church in western civilizations including northern Europe and the United States.

⁸² Cold climate cultures are task-oriented and tend to be individualistic and centered on personal independence. Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar: a Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures* (McDougal Publishing, 2010) Kindle Edition, 157.

⁸³ Hot climate cultures are relationship based and centered around community. Ibid.

to do “life together,” which goes against its independent and ruggedly individualistic nature, has been how to shape and form close, personal relationships in the church in spite of the discomfort in doing so and without succumbing to the temptation to institutionalize or over-structure small groups themselves.

Interestingly, in most cases retention of the church’s institutional nature in an increasingly connected global culture is exactly what has happened. Enter small groups. These cells of ecclesial micro-community have attempted to emulate in various ways the church of the apostolic fathers as described in the scriptures. The handprint of man, however, always seems to be strongly present as churches attempt to contextualize small groups and construct them in such a way as to appeal to ever-shifting demographics, perceptions and realities. While the last two generations of western believers have expressed a passionate desire to return to the church of Acts, they have largely missed the mark. Data observed in this study indicate that two thirds of the small group models observed failed to even include even two of the three *vexillum primaria* elements of Christian community found in Acts 2:42.

This paper focused on analyzing the predominant forms of small groups found in the modern church in an attempt to determine if small groups have departed from the biblical model of relational discipleship and communal evangelism. If departure is observed, it would result in failure on some level to effectively disciple believers and engage Christ-followers in fruitful evangelism. Examination of the New Testament attributes of Christian community, observation of characteristics of ten different types of micro-community structures found in post-modern churches, and qualitative analysis of data did in fact reveal a startling lack of overall alignment with biblical priorities among today’s predominant small groups. As pointed out in the data analysis, seventy percent of the small groups observed exhibited less than one third of biblical

characteristics recorded in Acts and the Epistles. None of the models demonstrated fifty percent, and only one model approached fifty percent.

Jesus established the church to be magnetic, drawing people into a Holy Spirit-empowered relational life experience that was radically different from anything the world had ever experienced. Its purpose and mission was, and still is, transformation of people into Christliness (Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18) through which the evil of our fallen world can be overcome with good (Romans 12:21), and the Gospel can be proclaimed to all creation (Mark 16:15). The organism of this transformation was, and remains, Christian community in the gathered church in all its forms. The Holy Spirit speaking through inspired Bible writers presented very specific attributes that must be present in order for the church to accomplish its mission. Jesus' vision became reality at Pentecost, and over the following three centuries the church, adhering to the biblical model of Christian community, expanded exponentially, infiltrating and filling cities throughout Palestine, the Near East, Asia and Africa. Robert Wilkin writes that there were fewer than ten thousand Christians in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century.⁸⁴ He estimates that the Empire's population at the time was about sixty million, pointing out that Christians made up .0017 of the population.⁸⁵ By the year 300, Wilkins estimates that Christians numbered six million and made up ten percent of the population of the Roman Empire.⁸⁶ There can be little doubt that this 600 fold increase was a result of the Holy Spirit's working through the *ekklesia's* faithful adherence to the biblical model for Christian community.

⁸⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: a Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 65-66.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

A number of respected data collection organizations⁸⁷ consistently report and agree that orthodox Christian church affiliation and attendance are at an all-time low and declining. Barna further reports that biblical literacy and grasp of basic biblical doctrines is also declining. Albert Mohler, quoting George Barna's research, says that "Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels. Many Christians cannot identify more than two or three of the disciples. According to data from the Barna Research Group, 60 percent of Americans can't name even [sic] five of the Ten Commandments."⁸⁸ While lack of sound teaching from the pulpits and in Bible study groups can be blamed in part for this, there is little doubt that unbiblical or minimally-biblical Christian community is contributing to the problem. While no quantitative have been found to support this conclusion, there is sufficient qualitative evidence to support its high likelihood.

There is no doubt the desire for and return to biblical, relational Christian community continues to increase. For the last four decades the small group phenomenon has crisscrossed Christendom from denominational churches to non-denominational churches, from megachurches to community churches, from inner city churches to rural churches, from wealthy churches to impoverished churches, from traditional churches to contemporary churches, from ethnic churches to "lifestyle" churches (ex. biker church, quilter church, etc.). The trend is testimony to the innate human need for close personal relationships that has been largely unmet by the church for centuries. Amplifying and accelerating the small group trend seems to be an ecclesial shift away from post-modern societal realities such as social media, which connect people via touch screens rather than handshakes, solitary electronic gaming as opposed to relational board games, and what has been called an epidemic of loneliness by health

⁸⁷ Barna.com, Gallop.com, et. al.

⁸⁸ Albert Mohler, "The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It's Our Problem," Albert Mohler (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary., January 20, 2016), <https://albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4>)

professionals and a “valley of dry bones” by author Diane Bennett. God’s people are rediscovering a deep inner desire to be together and experience life together biblically, but are stumbling into and embracing modern attempts to create that experience through small groups that are largely falling short.

Using Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14, Diane Bennett says, “Today’s culture reflects a ‘valley of dry bones.’”⁸⁹ She points out a reality where people have turned away from biblical truth and are living in isolation and living out what is right and wrong in their own eyes. She continues, “Certainly healthy small groups are not the only answer [to bringing life into the “dry bones” of churches and communities], yet striving to create environments where people are personally known, feel loved and accepted, served and cared for, challenged and held accountable, honored and celebrated, provide opportunities for God’s Word to be explored and acted upon in a safe and trusting community of friends.”⁹⁰ What Bennett is describing is biblical community that is focused on loving God, loving others, and pursuing truth and personal holiness, and which ultimately manifests in the form of an *ekklesia* that is effectively meeting the human need for relationships while focused on the communal proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom throughout the whole world (Matthew 24:14).

⁸⁹ Diana Bennett, *Renewing Your Church Through Healthy Small Groups*, 183.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

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APPENDIX A
DATA TABLE

Small Group Models

	Open	Closed	Cell	Free-Market	Neighborhood	Purpose-driven	Sermon-based	Organic	House	Host
<u>Biblical Characteristics</u>										
Time together			✓		✓				✓	
Accountability		✓							✓	
Shared leadership						✓				✓
Empowerment for ministry				✓						
Evangelism	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		
Apostolic	✓			✓						
Debrief (following ministry)										
Teaching						✓				✓
Fellowship	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Prayer	✓	✓								
Unity		✓								
Worship			✓			✓		✓		
Scripture-reading							✓			
Exhortation			✓						✓	
Ministry using spiritual gifts						✓		✓		

APPENDIX B

