

Session V

Our Community: How We Know and Love the Church

Remember that at one time you Gentiles . . . were . . . separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:11–19

Introduction

In this session we will be discussing our second of three Values: *Our Community: How We Know and Love the Church*. We will progress through this in a manner similar to last time:

1. First, I simply want to reintroduce our Value of Community to us.
2. Then, I want to discuss two particular Passions that flow out from this Value.
3. Then, we'll discuss Our Leadership, Our Gatherings, and Our Commitments as a church.

Creation and the Cosmic Symphony

The Bible opens with a sort of cosmic symphony. With God as Conductor, the universe is born. And with each day of creation a common refrain is repeated again and again: "And God saw that it was good" (6x).

Divine Dissonance

But all of this sets us up for the moment when the whole cadence of creation is thrown off, and this jarring dissonance is introduced in Genesis 2:18, when God looks at Adam and says: "It is not good that the man should be alone." There's an awkwardness to all of this. God is good. What He makes is good. How in the world could He have missed this one? Shouldn't omniscience have come through for Him here?

We can be confident that God did not miss this. He is only wanting to make sure that we don't miss this. There's a point He's trying to make for us here. By creating this awkward dissonance (and it gets even more awkward, with God parading the animals before Adam as potential partners), God is drawing our attention to the simple yet significant fact that man needs to be in community.

As God is in community within Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—so man created in God's image needs to be in community—therefore "male and female He created them" (1:27). And when at last man has woman we can return to 1:31 to hear God's declaration over it all: "[B]ehold, it was very good."

Human Dissonance

But, into this divine symphony, man introduces a dissonance of his own. When Adam and Eve turn from God it's as if they take a hammer to the mirror of God's image in them. And it shatters. And when it shatters, it doesn't just shatter in the vertical, but in the horizontal. When man breaks community with God, he also breaks it with woman—"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (3:12).

There's a dividing wall of hostility raised between us and God, raised between individuals (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel), and, later, raised even between whole nations (Jews and Gentiles).

We live in this reality every day! It's why we have locks on our front doors. It's why we do background checks for our kids ministry volunteers. It's why even neighbors so often rush past one another on the sidewalk without ever even saying hello. We're estranged from family, from neighbor, from nations. Man is alone, and it is not good.

Redemption and the Package Deal of Reconciliation

But we have a good God don't we?! It was our sin that separated us. So He made His Son to be sin on our behalf. In some mysterious way, God breaks community with Himself—the Father against the Son—that we might be brought back into community with God and with one another!

Read Ephesians 2:13-14 again: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility."

The most striking feature of Ephesians 2 is that reconciliation is a package deal. To be reconciled to God is also to be reconciled to one another. To be brought near to God in the vertical is to have the dividing wall of hostility removed in the horizontal. When you get the former, you get the latter. And you can't get the one without the other. You can't have the Father if you won't take the Gentile!

You can't have the Father if you won't take the Gentile!

Here is where it again becomes so plain that our Values are a part of an interconnected ecosystem. Faith gives way to Community. Or as Ray Ortlund puts it in his little book *The Gospel*: "Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture."¹ Or as I've stated it now so many times: We are a cross-centered and cross-cultured church.

The love that God has shown us in the gospel, is the same kind of love we start to show one another.

Consummation and the Nucleus of God's New Creation

And it gets even more amazing. God's ultimate goal of cosmic reconciliation—"to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10)—begins in the church. It begins right here in this room, with these people. We are the nucleus of God's new creation.

That's why all of the earth is described as looking to the church—creation is "longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19). And it's why all of heaven is looking to the church—"angels long to look" into what's going on here (1 Pet 1:12). What God is beginning here with us will one day envelope the universe!

¹ (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 21.

O brothers and sisters, what kind of community ought we then to be?! Ephesians 2 makes it plain: the great goal of God in the cross was not merely that we be reconciled to Him, but that we be also reconciled to one another. This means, on a sadder note, that when we move against this momentum—when we turn coldly from our spouse in the bed, when we harden our hearts against our brother or sister in Christ, when we compete and gossip behind each other’s back—we stand in opposition not only to the other person, but to God Himself who has given His very Son that we might be reconciled with one another! How could we drink from the cool streams of his grace and then turn and spit acid on one another?! May such a thing never be in our church!

I praise God that there are so many tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations represented even in this little church, and that we enjoy rich, reconciled community with one another, uniting around the cross. By His grace, may it only grow richer!

How could we drink from the cool streams of his grace and then turn and spit acid on one another?!

Our Passions

1. Gospel Humility

There are few things I am more passionate about cultivating in this church than this: Gospel Humility. As far as I can tell, a church will live or die on this point. Are we going to bicker and bite, compete and divide? Or are we going to humble ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him?!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, quotes from Luke’s gospel and then proceeds with a warning for the church:

“There arose a reasoning [or ‘argument’] among them, which of them should be the greatest” (Luke 9:46). We know who it is that sows this thought in the Christian community. But perhaps we do not bear in mind enough that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord. Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life-and-death contest. “There arose a reasoning among them”: this is enough to destroy a fellowship.

Hence it is vitally necessary that every Christian community from the very outset face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it. There is no time to lose here, for from the first moment when a man meets another person he is looking for a strategic position he can assume and hold over against that person. . . . [It] can occur in the most polite or even pious environment. . . . It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others.²

What are we to do with this? How do we resist this massive threat to Christian community? How does the church “face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it”? Answer: Gospel Humility.

To flesh this out, consider a quote I came across from Greg Gilbert: “Unity lives where self regard dies, and self regard dies at the foot of the cross.” We will be united (community) only where self regard dies (humility), and self regard dies at the foot of the cross (gospel).

² (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), 90-91.

Let's walk back up his thought for a minute.

1. At the Foot of the Cross, Self Regard Dies.

Self regard, pride, works in two different directions:

1. We commonly think of it, on the one hand, as a *high* regard for self—"Aren't I great?!"
2. But it is of the same essence, on the other hand, when one has such *low* regard for self—"Aren't I horrible?!"

In both cases it is that all of life is orbiting around self.

Brothers and sisters, if we still have regard for self after gazing upon the cross of Christ, we either have not yet seen the cross for what it truly is, or we have strayed dangerously far from it and are in desperate need of returning back to it.

The cross will not let me have self regard on either side of the balance. If I have high regard for self, the cross says I am a horror—so shot through with sin that, for God to even look upon me again, the beloved Son had to die. But, if I have low regard for self, the cross says I am a treasure—so cherished that, to bring me back home to God, the beloved Son chose to die.

O, my friends, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. No one is more loveable than another here. No one is more loathsome here. All of your goodness can't endear you. All of your badness can't disqualify you. God's grace is no respecter of persons. It's concern is not for you on either side of the balance, but only where you stand in relation to Christ!

And self regard just dies right there! It's no longer about me at all. It's about Him!

2. Where Self Regard Dies, Unity Lives!

And as self regard dies at the foot of the cross, true Christian unity and community comes alive! Like compost in the soil, the decaying of my pride, feeds the root of our fellowship!

And what happens when a community has lost regard for self? They can finally have regard for one another.

As Bonhoeffer comes out in the conclusion of his thought: "Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together."³

*Unity lives where self regard dies, and self regard dies
at the foot of the cross.*

Gilbert's flow of thought really just follows the Apostle Paul's in Philippians 2:1-8:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of

³ Ibid., 91.

others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Unity in our community will come from *humility*, but humility will be formed in us only by the *gospel*. We are passionate about Gospel Humility in this church.

2. Every-Member Ministry

We must not think that because we are all humbled by the cross of Christ that we are all therefore irrelevant to the mission of Christ. No! He humbles us so that He can use us.

We are of little use to the kingdom so long as we think we are of great use. It is only when we have given up on our own strength and purpose that we can at last be reinvigorated with His. He can start using us because we stop fighting back. To come under Christ is not to sit ourselves down on the bench so much as it is to finally be put in the game.

With Christ as our Head, we become a member of His body, and in His body, every part plays a vital role. Far from irrelevant to the mission of Christ in this church, you are vital to it.

This is the Paul's great burden in 1 Corinthians 12:

[T]here are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . .

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (vv. 4-7, 14-20)

Some people approach the church like those guys in the gym that think every day is biceps day. The ladies don't dig big calves like they dig big biceps, so every day is biceps day. But after months, even years, of this, the guys look ridiculous. They have these massive tree-branch arms and these tiny twig legs. If you got in a fight, all you'd have to do is kick his shins and he would just topple over.

Well, some people approach the church like this. The work is to be done by a few. They might think this for a number of reasons:

- Maybe they're the bicep and they're proud—"Stand back, I got this!"
- Maybe they're not the bicep and they're lazy—"Pass out the popcorn and let me just veg."
- Or maybe they're broken and depressed and feel like others need to do it because if they try they're just going to screw it up.

Whatever the case, every day is biceps day. So Christ's body gets all disproportional and disfigured. And we have the appearance of strength but we're fundamentally weak.

Brothers and sister, may it never be with us! Every member matters.

The call of the pastor or the Elder or the leader is not so much to do all the heavy lifting as it is to equip every member to lift together: “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11–12).

It is only as every member is playing a vital role that the body as a whole is made strong. Paul goes on to say that this is how we stop being “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (v. 14). Satan can’t just come and kick our shins, because every member is involved in this thing.

So this a call for the proud (like myself) to let others into the work. You are not God’s gift to the church. Every member is God’s gift to the church. This is a call for the lazy to get off the couch. God didn’t save you to be a spectator, but a soldier. You are needed in this church. This is a call for the depressed to “shake yourself from the dust and arise” (Isa 52:2). The Spirit of Christ is in you. Have no fear! “[F]or God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love” (2 Tim 1:7).

This is a call for Every-Member Ministry.

Our Leadership

Leadership for the Sake of the Membership

With our presuppositions of Gospel Humility and Every-Member Ministry in place, we are positioned to better understand this next discussion of Our Leadership. By now it should be clear we are not talking about leadership as those who are more worthy—for the ground is level at the foot of the cross; or more important—for every member is a minister. But, nonetheless, God, because He cares for the church, provides her with structure, authority, and leadership.

God cares not only for *ardor* in the church—that the spiritual gifts are being passionately pursued and exercised; He cares also for *order*—that the spiritual gifts are being used in an appropriate way (1 Cor 14:40).

God cares not only for the *organism* of the church—that, like a body, every member is doing its part; He cares also for the *organization* of the church—that, like a body, there is a skeletal structure designed to support and undergird the organic life.

God promotes *order* for the sake of *ardor*. He promotes *organization* for the sake of the *organism*. He establishes *leadership* for the sake of the *membership*.

Consider Paul who comes out after devoting 13 verses to the qualifications for Elders and Deacons in the church, and tells Timothy: “I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim 3:14–15).

In other words, Elders and Deacons, leadership and authority, are critical to the overall health of the household of God. Just as a family without father or mother would be a disaster (do you have any idea what my house would look like if it was run by my kids!), so too would a church be without official leadership.

The Origin, Function, and Definition of the Elder and Deacon

The church, it would seem from the Scriptures then, is given two perpetual offices by her Savior: namely, the Elder and the Deacon. And these are the two types of official leadership that we recognize here at Mercy Hill.

There are so many ways we could come at this. I thought it might be interesting to trace the origin of these two offices, and identify their general function in the church, as we make our way towards a definition.

1. Jesus

Any discussion of authority in the church has to start with Jesus. He is the Head (Col 1:18), the Cornerstone (Eph 2:20), the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). All authority we are given in the church is derived from and representative of Him. So we can learn what leadership in the church ought to look like by looking at how Jesus led. And as we look at Him we recognize that He came to His people as a servant-leader. And He came as a servant-leader concerned primarily with a ministry of two things: *word* and *deed*.

That's why, Matthew describes our Lord's entrance into public ministry in this way: "He went throughout all Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues and *proclaiming* the gospel of the kingdom and *healing* every disease and every affliction among the people" (Matt 4:23). Word and deed. Truth and love. When Christ walked the earth, He did not merely proclaim the Kingdom, He presented and produced it. His preaching was confirmed with power. God is not just all talk. His checks don't bounce. When He says He's coming to love, to heal, to free, to save, that's what He does. And Jesus seals this once and for all in His death and resurrection.

2. The Apostles

And then this authority and ministry of Christ starts to pass to the church. Luke makes the connection between the word and deed ministry of Christ with that of the early church when he writes: "In the first book [the gospel of Luke], O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began to do and teach*, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1–2).

The implication of Luke's statement is twofold for our discussion here:

1. First, if Luke's gospel only recorded what Jesus began to do and teach, then the book of Acts must record what Jesus continued to do and teach.
2. But, second, this doing and teaching, this word and deed ministry, would now be by Christ's Spirit in and through the church, particularly in and through "the apostles whom he had chosen." Here is the first form of official leadership established by Christ in the New Testament church.

But something happens in Acts 6. The church has grown. It's grown so big in fact that the Apostles cannot possibly head up both the word and deed ministries in the church. The gospel they were preaching was being contradicted in the community as Greek widows were not being cared for like those of the Hebrews. When gospel word is not accompanied by gospel deed, the very gospel itself is at stake. So, we read that "the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word'" (vv. 2–4).

"We need another office to take up the *deed* ministry, because we can't neglect the *word* ministry." And because of this new appointment of some to official leadership, we go on to read: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (v. 7).

3. Elders and Deacons

Now, this vignette has critical implications for official leadership as it comes to be developed in the church.

The Apostles, commissioned here to minister the word in particular, are seen in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 handing off this ministry to Elders. This accounts for the one qualification that particularly distinguishes an Elder from a Deacon: He must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2); and "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that

he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9). He must take the apostolic word and proclaim it to the church.

The office of Deacon, on the other hand, is understood by many as having its roots in this original group of seven appointed to serve the church in gospel deed. Deacon (Gk. *diakonos*), after all, means *servant*. They are appointed to both *free up* the Elders to focus on the broader ministry of the word and to *legitimize* that ministry of the word by serving and loving those under the Elders’ care. They exist to help the church make sure she isn’t just all talk, that the church’s checks don’t bounce, that the gospel has hands and feet, that we don’t say, “Be warm and filled in the name of Jesus” while we send them away cold and empty (Jas 2:16).

To put definitions on these two offices at this point:

Elders are under-shepherds of Christ, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to serve by leading, preeminently in the proclamation of gospel word.

Deacons are assistants to the Elders, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to lead by serving, preeminently in the manifestation of gospel deed.

It is a devastating thing that when so many think of church leadership the first thing that comes to mind is hypocrisy. God actually designed and established church leadership for precisely the opposite reason! They are to keep the church from hypocrisy. Gospel word without Gospel deed is unloving. Gospel deed without gospel word is untrue. But Gospel word plus Gospel deed is Christ. And so God establishes Elders and Deacons to help the church more effectively represent Christ to the world!

In all of this, we are not taking away from the Every-Member Ministry we already established. The church as a whole is commissioned by God to participate in this ministry of word and deed (1 Pet 4:10-11). But God gives official leadership to help organize, equip, and stimulate such ministry in all the members.

Philippians 1:1 puts a nice cap on this discussion. Paul begins his letter this way: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...” In the church you have the *saints* (members), who are under care of *overseers* (Elders) and *deacons*, who were given their authority from *Apostles* like Paul, who is himself a servant of, under the authority of, *Christ Jesus*.

Gospel word without Gospel deed is unloving. Gospel deed without gospel word is untrue. But Gospel word plus Gospel deed is Christ.

Women and Church Leadership

For this topic, please refer to Appendix 7: Women and Church Leadership.

Our Gatherings

The 20/20 Vision

As we begin now to consider Our Gatherings as a church, allow me to direct you to what we've called The 20/20 Vision. You'll find that vision laid out in Appendix 8, and I would encourage you to read it. But, in short, drawing from Acts 20:20, I simply make the claim that if we are to see and show Christ rightly (with 20/20 vision), we must be meeting in both large gatherings and small groups. The largest gathering we have is the Sunday Service. And our standard small groups are the Home Group and, diving down even deeper, the DNA Group.

The Sunday Service

Initially it seems the early Christians gathered formally for worship on the last day of the week, Saturday (the Sabbath) with the Jews in the temple and synagogues. But as it became clear that the Jews were rejecting their Messiah and that the Christians were now a distinguished religious people, "Christians" (Acts 11:26), they began meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of Jesus' resurrection, appropriately called "the Lord's Day" (Rev 1:10; cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).

Jesus' resurrection on this first day of the week initiated a new creation, with a new humanity and, hence, a new day of worship!

I think people are prone to neglect or downplay the Sunday gatherings because they don't quite get what's going on here. For some it's just another event on the calendar. And if something better comes up, well, there's always next week. "I mean, really, what's the point? We just get together and talk about the same thing and sing the same songs."

The author of Hebrews comes in to help us at this point. Hebrews 10 begins with a discussion of Christ's high priestly work in offering a full and final sacrifice for our sins (vv. 1-14). Then it moves to a discussion of the New Covenant Christ has made with us in His blood (vv. 15-18).

And then in vv. 19-25, the author begins to draw out implications for the covenant community, the local church. And with these implications he gives us a breathtaking vision for the local church in general, and the Sunday Service in particular:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

In light of Christ's work on the cross for us, the author calls us to three "let-us"s—three things we ought to do when we meet together.

1. First, when we meet together: "*let us draw near*" to God (v. 22). We gather together and we rush the throne of grace. Coming together is ultimately about coming into God's presence!
2. Second, when we meet together: "*let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering*" (v. 23). We encourage one another to keep holding onto the One who is holding onto us. Hearts can drift into doubt and denial. And we're here to hold up each other's arms.
3. Third, when we meet together: "*let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works*" (v. 24). Hearts can grow cold and embittered, lazy and apathetic. And we're here to stir one another up.

And he closes with a final plea: "[Do] not [neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (v. 25).

You're going to need one another in the days ahead. Your faith will be tested. Trials will come. If you're not gathering with the Saints, you're not going to make it. The world, your flesh, the Devil are doing everything they can to keep your eyes off the coming Day and fixate them on the here and now. "Eat, drink, and be merry. Get your revenge. Indulge your lusts. Live it up." But we come in here and we say, "No way! Let's rush the throne. Let's hold fast the confession. Let's stir each other up. And let's keep waiting for that Day that's drawing near!"

Consider the words of Charles Spurgeon at this point:

One day a young man came to visit [Spurgeon] and said to [him], "I can be a Christian without the church; I don't need others." They were sitting in the lounge by an open fire and Spurgeon picked up some tongs, took a coal from the blazing fire and placed it on the hearth. They continued talking and after a while, Spurgeon said, "Look down at the hearth. What happened to the coal I took out of the fire?" The young man answered, "Well, it's become black. It's lost its heat and its flame." Spurgeon replied, "Young man, that's why you need to be part of the church, because it is only together we are stimulated and together that we grow. But like this coal taken out of the fire, on its own it dies out. But in the heat of the fire all the other coals are stimulating it to go on glowing and give off heat."⁴

You are helping me burn, and I pray I am helping you! O church, let's not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some! It is not good that man should be alone. But "[b]ehold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] dwell [together] in unity"! (Psa 133:1).

Home Groups

Moving towards smaller groups at Mercy Hill, let's consider Home Groups for a moment. In the application I had to fill out to apply for the pastorate here, I was asked to describe my understanding of Home Groups. I still today stand behind what I wrote back then:

Small groups are a central component to what I would term my 20/20 vision for the church. This vision comes from Acts 20:20 where Paul states that he taught the Ephesian saints the word of God both "in public and from house to house." So his pastoral practice, it seems, included both large gatherings and small groups. Upon consideration we can see how critical such small groups are for all ministry fronts—*upward* (to God), *inward* (to fellow believers), and *outward* (to the unbelieving world). Regarding the upper front, small groups give people a chance to digest, question, meditate on, and personalize the word of God. Opportunity is given for the church to act as Bereans and examine the Scriptures for themselves (Acts 17:11). Regarding the inner front, small groups provide the primary context in which the church can live out the "one-anothering" spoken of in the New Testament (i.e. Rom 12:9-21). Here is where we can truly get to know and love other saints and where we can be truly known and loved ourselves. Finally, regarding the outer front, small groups should serve as "missional communities," strategically located in neighborhoods not to be dams of God's grace but estuaries—places where the ocean of God's love meets the parched riverbeds of this world. Small groups are the arms of the church, reaching into the neighborhoods. They can also serve as a wonderful place to raise up young leaders and as potential seedbeds for future church plants.

DNA Groups

We define DNA Groups as follows:

*A DNA Group is a group of two to four committed people who meet on a consistent basis to Discover, Nurture, and Apply Christ together until He is all in all.*⁵

⁴ <http://www.livingtruthus.com/devotional.asp?date=12/7/2014>.

⁵ It should be noted that, due to the personal nature of these groups, they are always composed of people of the same gender.

I should say, before we unpack this definition, that DNA Groups are essential to our understanding of discipleship at Mercy Hill. In fact, we define discipleship in virtually the same way.⁶ When you think about it, as Jesus set out to make disciples, He was really just calling people to follow, see, love, and look more and more like Him. Discipleship was a critical part of His plan to recode our genetics and renew us in His image.

But then He left. Well, not really. But we no longer see Him with our physical eyes. Instead He has given us His Spirit, and He calls us to follow Him together. We too are to make disciples, though not ultimately of ourselves, but of Him—“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . , teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matt 28:19–20). DNA Groups exist for this very purpose.

So what exactly is a DNA Group? Every word in our definition above counts. Let’s take it bit by bit.

1. Two to Four

DNA Groups are intentionally kept very small. Because these groups aim to bring Christ into each member’s life at the genetic level, each member of the group must have space to Discover, Nurture, and Apply Christ for himself. There is a deeply personal aspect to our faith. It is *my* heart that must be realigned with God’s. If each member is to personally engage with one another and the Lord at this deep level, the groups must be kept small to provide both the time and intimate atmosphere appropriate for such work.

Jesus is our model at this point. Certainly, He ministered to large crowds at times (Luke 6:17-19), but He specifically gave His attention to the twelve (6:12-16) and, even more narrowly, to the three (8:51; 9:28). He understood that if He was to get into His disciples’ hearts, He had to get them into smaller, intimate groups.

2. Committed and Consistent

We must face here the simple fact that, unless this small group of people is committed to and consistent with one another, little growth can take place.

When Jesus called His disciples there could be no shuffling of the feet. Those who tried were met with sobering words: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Far better were those disciples who, when called, seemed to sense the majesty of the One calling them and immediately left everything to follow Him (5:11, 28). Jesus knew that commitment and consistency were required for true and lasting discipleship and image renewal to take place.

Obviously, we are not calling for commitment and consistency to a DNA Group with the same kind of severity, but a principle is here established for us. If we want to grow together towards Christ, we must meet together on a regular basis.

3. Discover, Nurture, and Apply

Discovering Christ simply means that we come to see more of Him—who He is, what He has done, what He teaches, what He promises. We uncover more of the glory of His person and work. We explore the width, breadth, height, and depth of the gospel together.

Nurturing Christ takes the things discovered about Him and attempts to draw it all down into our hearts. We are not satisfied merely knowing Christ with our heads, we want to relate to Him, trust Him, love Him, worship Him with all of our hearts.

⁶ We define discipleship as “the process of Discovering, Nurturing, and Applying Christ together until He is all in all.”

Applying Christ looks to move all of this out into our lives. True and vibrant faith in one's heart leads to love and obedience in one's life. We are not satisfied to only know Christ with our heads—that would be mere intellectualism. Nor are we satisfied when once his truths have reached our hearts—that would be mere sentimentalism. The full range of religious motion should move through the *head* and *heart* to the *hands*. Remember Christ's redemption is unto image renewal. We ought to start looking more and more like Him in our daily lives.

Again, Christ models this process wonderfully for us in His own discipleship ministry. He begins with a call to discover Him: "Follow Me" (Luke 5:27). In other words: "Come, see, listen, *discover* who I am."

And as the disciples come to discover many things about Him, Jesus is not satisfied with letting it all remain intellectual and external. He attempts to move it all towards their hearts: "But who do *you* say that I am?" (Luke 9:20). In other words: "It is not enough to know about Me *intellectually*, you must know Me *personally*. Now that You have followed after and discovered much about Me, who am I to you?" Here is the call to *nurture* Christ.

But even a profession of faith—"[You are] the Christ of God" (Luke 9:20)—is not the end goal for Jesus. The embrace of Him as Christ by faith in one's heart effects a change in one's nature that will start to work out in one's life. The disciples were not called and saved merely to remain as they were. They were called and saved to be conformed into the image of the Son. And this has practical outworkings: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). In other words: "All that you have seen in Me is what I am going to now do in you." Here is the call to *apply* Christ.

4. Together

While I certainly do believe in discipleship as *mentorship*—discipleship that moves from a more seasoned believer to a younger one; discipleship is also *mutuality*—believers follow Christ together. We are co-travelers—young and old, novice and mature, fresh and seasoned—behind Calvary's King.

Each DNA Group will always have some blend of both mentorship and mutuality. Some groups will find themselves at similar levels of maturity, in which case there will be greater mutuality. Other groups will find that one individual stands out as a leader in things the other members lack, in which case there will be greater mentorship. In either case, a blend will always be present. No matter how mature or immature we feel, there will always be things we can learn from others and things we can teach to others.

Discipleship for us is different than it was for Christ. He could simply say, "Follow Me" and it was enough. But we are not the Lord and Savior. It is not ours to say, "Follow Me" but rather, "Follow *Him* with Me." We are in this discipleship thing *together*.

5. Until He Is All In All

Here is where we remember that God's redemption is co-extensive with His creation—meaning: His redemption will one day encompass everything—from soul, to body, to nature; from marriage, to family, to friendship; from sleep, to work, to hobby; etc. There is no divide in our lives between things that are "Christian" and things that are merely "secular," between things that Christ cares about and things that He doesn't.

Christianity is not merely another religion, it is a new way to be human. And we take this new humanity with us into everything that we do. His redemption is aiming towards that breathtakingly comprehensive call in 1 Cor. 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do *all* to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31) DNA Group members get into each other's lives and ask: What does this "*all*" look like for you?! How is Christ all when you're sitting in a cubicle, when you're changing a diaper, when you're stuck in traffic, when you're sipping a glass of wine?

Christ didn't merely offer His disciples doctrines to be believed or rituals to be performed. He offered them back their humanity. And that is why His discipleship took the shape that it did. Certainly He shared Scripture with them, prayed with them, evangelized with them, and ministered with them; but He also walked dirt roads with them, laughed at jokes with them, wept in the face of loss with them, ate fresh bread with them, drank good wine with them, slept under the stars with them, did ordinary life stuff with them.

He did all those "spiritual" things we think of, but He also put the spirit back into all those "physical" things we often devalue. He showed us that true discipleship is not satisfied *until Christ is all in all*.

The Resource Wheel

If you are looking for good resources to read on your own or (especially) with others in a DNA Group-like setting, we've created what we call the Resource Wheel (see Appendix 9). This Resource Wheel guides you first through what we consider to be the fundamentals of Christian doctrine and life and then proceeds from there to help you get a better grasp of our core values: Faith, Community, and Mission.

Our Commitments

Please refer to Appendix 10 to read up on Our Relational Commitments as a church. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, counseling, confidentiality, and mutual accountability.