

Why Groups?

Acts 2:42-47; April 30, 2017

Intro: Steps change stories - kids taking next steps on a baseball team

- I'm not sure if you've heard or not, but I took a big step last month (it's more like a leap). I agreed to manage and be the head coach for Emet's little league team. We're the AAA Baltimore Orioles (put my hat on and grab by glove and ball). This is a big leap because I spent most of my early years playing football, not baseball. So there's a lot of learning that I'm doing right now.
- I'm just curious. Do we have any baseball players in here? Any former little league players? Any coaches or former coaches? I'm sure you guys collected a bunch trophies.
- Well, let me bring you behind the scenes a little bit. I start the year with 13 guys on my team and my job as a coach is figure out where each kid best fits on the team to give us the best chance of winning games. I've got 15 regular season games to do this and then come the playoffs (it's little league so we all make the playoffs).
- We've currently played 3 games so far (a fifth of the way through the season) and I'm successfully 0-3. We've lost every single game.
- So what do I do: each game I tell my kids, "If each of you will get better today in one area, we'll be better as a team tomorrow. In fact, if each of you get better at something in every practice and in every game, after 15 games, we'll be a completely different team than we are right now. We might even be able to compete for a championship."
- The point: you see, when everyone individually takes a step forward together, it changes the future of the whole. This is the goal of this "Steps" sermon series that we're continuing today.
- This is our Discipleship Strategy as a church. Let me draw your attention to the tagline again. It says, "Helping all people become mature and multiplying followers of Jesus." This is why we exist as a church and it's really simple. We exist to help you become more like Jesus (that's what we mean by maturity) and equip you to help others become more like Jesus (that's we what we mean by multiplication).
- Last week we zoomed in on the "Sunday Experience" circle and Tanner challenged us with five compelling reasons for why we should prioritize "Sunday Worship."
- As we zoom back out at and look at the entire Strategy again, we're not going to preach a sermon about NEXT. NEXT is a luncheon that we host roughly once a month and it's the best first step for anyone who's new to RHC. At NEXT you'll be able to connect with some people at our church and hear about how you can take next steps with Jesus and our church. The primary next steps we push at NEXT are Groups and Teams.
- Today, I'm going to seek to answer the question, "Why Groups?"

For the answer, let's go to Acts 2 in our Bibles.

The Context:

- Jesus commissions his disciples, tells them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit and then ascends into heaven (Acts 1:4-9).
- They returned to Jerusalem and waited for the day of Pentecost, which occurs in Acts

2:1-13. The Spirit comes and Peter preaches to the crowd and explains, using OT references, what is happening and what it means about Jesus (he is now exalted as Lord; Acts 2:14-36).

- The people respond in an incredible way (Acts 2:37-41).
 - This is the birth of the church. Now, what did they do?

Read Acts 2:42-47

- To be fair, the word “Groups” doesn’t appear in these verses but the concept of “community” and “togetherness” is everywhere. Here’s what this passage teaches us about the role of community in the early church.

I. The Priority of Community

- “They devoted themselves to...” (42) or “they were devoting themselves...”
 - This language conveys the idea of ongoing persistence in these activities (Bock).
 - Who is the “they”? See 2:41. It’s the new believers.
 - You were made for community, not isolation. The Christian life isn’t a solo project.

This new community took priority over:

- Relationships
 - “And all who believed were together and had all things in common” (44).
- Time and calendar
 - “Day by day...” (46).
- Resources (money, homes, food)
 - “And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (45).

What community was not:

- It was not simply an “add-on” to their lives.
- It wasn’t a check box on their weekly to do list.
- This is how many of us view church:
 - It’s just another ball that we have to juggle along with family, friends, career, leisure, chores, decisions, money, and so on.

Community was central to their new identity as a follower of Jesus:

- Tim Chester and Steve Timmis in their book, *Total Church*, propose a better model than juggling church. They write, “An alternative model is to view our various activities and responsibilities as spokes of a wheel. At the center or hub of life is not me as an individual but us as members of the Christian community. Church is not another ball for me to juggle but that which defines who I am and gives Christlike shape to my life” (Chester and Timmis).

Transition: Looking back at the text, we not only see the *priority* of community, we see the *practice* of community.

II. The Practice of Community

- **Learn together (apostles teaching)**
 - This echoes the Great Commission where Jesus says, "...teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you" (Matt. 28:19).
 - "It would likely have included all kinds of instruction like what we see in the Gospels and Epistles: ethical and practical teaching and a grounding in the central promise God had given in Jesus" (Bock).
 - Our learning centered on the Word is focused in two directions:
 - Learning how to become more like Jesus (sanctification)
 - Learning how to help others become more like Jesus (evangelism/discipleship)
- **Share life together (fellowship)**
 - The Bible often expresses the ideal of biblical community with the Greek word *koinonia*, which is translated "fellowship." It means to share in common. It points to the extremely "personal interactive character of relationships in the early church at all levels. There is a real sense of connection to, between and for each other (Bock).
 - They shared their lives with each other (time, money, resources).
 - 2:44-45 describes the depth of care and intentionality that was happening in their relationships. They were even selling possessions to care for each other. And the picture is one of sharing done again and again and over and over.
 - They cared for another.
 - In the NT, there are 59 one-another's of Scripture describing how the people cared for each other. Love, serve, honor, rejoice, instruct, weep, care for, forgive, teach, bear with, carry one another's burden, encourage, build up, pray for.
 - You need to connect with a group because you need others.
 - To think otherwise reveals self-sufficiency.
 - You need to connect with a group because others need you.
 - One of the primary ways we as accomplish care at our church is through our groups. One of the best ways to make sure you don't fall through the cracks at RHC is to get connect with a group.
 - This can't just happen in a weekly 2 hour gathering at one of our groups.
- **Eat together (breaking bread)**
 - It is unclear here whether this term refers to the Lord's Supper or as a reference to taking some meals together, of which the Lord's Supper was a part. But, since most of the other references to meals are broad, it probably suggests the reference here was broad as well.

- “Either way, the phrase suggests the intimate interaction and mutual acceptance that was a part of community life” (Bock).
- **Pray together (the prayers)**
 - The picture here is of a community of believers committed to seeking the Lord’s will and direction for their lives.

Transition: Think of our Groups as contexts where you can find friends who will spur you towards Jesus. In addition to the priority and practice of community, we see the power of community.

III. The Power of Community

- Verse 47 says that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
- How were people added? We’re just told that God did it. But we know through the rest of the Bible that the way people are saved is through hearing the gospel, the good news about Jesus and responding through repentance and faith (the same way these people responded in Acts 2). So, though the focus isn’t on their *sharing*, there’s no doubt in my mind that this early community was telling others about Jesus (see Acts 1:8).
- The focus in the text, though, is not their sharing but their infectious community (Witherington). Their community was a powerful display of the gospel, especially toward outsiders (“they have favor with all the people”). People were taking notice.
- Jesus had told his disciples in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another.” That love was on display in the early church and it was compelling.
- Think about this: your group life has the potential to be an incredible apologetic for the gospel. In this sense, community isn’t necessarily the end goal.
- What if the way your friends, neighbors, co-workers, classmates and family are going to be reached is through them seeing and then experiencing true gospel community in your life?
- What if in addition to us praying and looking for opportunities to share the gospel with other, we also collectively took steps as a church to practice this kind of community? Wouldn’t that make our gospel witness that much stronger?
- Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, when asked how I should reach my unbelieving friends say this, “My answer is to find ways of introducing them to the Christian community. The life of the Christian community provokes a response...Let our relationships provoke questions” (Chester and Timmis).
 - What steps can you take with community so that more and more your relationship at RHC provoke questions?
- Warning!!! The early church pursued radical community but not as a closed circle. One of the things we have to fight against as a church is the temptation to turn completely inward in our pursuit community. When we do that, we’re not imitating the early church. In addition to people growing in their sacrificial care for others, I’ll know we’re growing in our pursuit of community when more and more people are getting saved through

participating in our groups.

The point and next step challenge: Don't isolate but integrate and connect with a Group to experience and extend transformation in community.

Groups at RHC

We have four types of groups:

- Explore Groups (for those exploring Jesus and Christianity)
- Start Groups (for those who are new followers of Jesus)
- Community Groups (sermon based discussion groups for the majority of people).
- Equip Groups (for equipping on various topics of the Christian life)

Why haven't you connected with a Group?

- I don't know anyone (it's going to stay that way until you attend a group; that's why you need to get in a group)
- I'm afraid of people seeing how messed up I am (you'll just be in good company)
- What if I don't like it? (Go check out another group).
- Connecting with a Group is a lot like shopping for a new pair of shoes. If you try a pair on that doesn't fit right, you just keep trying other pairs until you find one that fits.

Transition: Grab your Groups "next steps" card. I want to extend the challenge to you that my little league players hear each practice and game. If we will all take a step forward together, it will change the future of the RHC and our city.

Group Respond Card

I'm interested in taking the following next steps with groups:

- Learn more by attending a Spring Group at least once by May 24
 - Many will be wrapping up over the next few weeks (on the positive side, you won't get locked in forever if you attend now :)).
- Connect with a Summer Group (beginning in June):
 - Explore
 - Start
 - Community
 - Equip (men/women/other)
- Serve with a Group once during "Serve Medford Week" (June 17-24)
- Lead a Summer Group (Explore, Start, Community, Equip)
 - Must be a member (come tonight).
- Lead a Fall Group (Explore, Start, Community, Equip)
 - Must be a member (come tonight)
 - The more groups we multiply, the more options people have and the less excuses they have for not attending (Groups with kids, students, those who work late)

- Host (but not lead) a Group in my home this summer.
- Host (but not lead) a Group in my home this fall.
- Be intentionally equipped to lead a Group in the next year.