

Benefits Of A Sermon Based Small Group

By Nate Holdridge*

Calvary Monterey, the church I pastor, embraces a simple ministry model. We aren't a collection of Sunday, plus a billion ministries to subspecific groups. The left-handed-golfers-with-a-plus-13-handicap will have to look elsewhere for a ministry explicitly catered to their needs. Instead, we mostly gather together on Sundays and disperse into homes and coffee shops and office spaces during the week. And when our groups gather, part of their time together is spent in discussion about the previous Sunday's text and teaching.

I, for one, have never expected the discussion to be the highlight of our groups, but a way for the Spirit to gain entry into our time together, almost an excuse for us to gather. The weightiest stuff happens when we pray together, share our burdens, and befriend others who are in Christ. These relationships, for many, have exploded out into an incalculable network of interconnections, discipleship lessons, and support systems. The meeting is, in other words, a start, a launching pad for Christian life together.

Still, our gatherings do center upon a discussion about the text and teaching from the previous Sunday. As I see it, there are many benefits to this approach. Here are six of them.

1. It maximizes the impact of God's Word.

On Sundays I teach, I'll post an outline of my sermon notes. The web traffic to those notes increases once we are in groups. I love it. Listening to a passage and teaching you know you'll discuss with friends enhances anticipation for the Word. As a pastor, I often pray for the hearts of those who'll receive the word. Jesus spoke of four types of soil or hearts which receive the seed or word of God. The fourth soil he spoke of was soft, ready, and bore incredible fruit. I pray for this type of heart to spread within our church, and the sermon-based small groups have helped bring it to pass. More people take notes during the teaching since they know they will need to revisit it later on.

2. It unifies our church.

We would love it if 100% of the adults at Calvary committed to a Life Group, but since we realize that is an improbable goal, we shoot for 60-70%. When we gather on Sundays, we come from all over the county. We arrive, every tribe, nation, and tongue. We are a mixture of young and old, man and woman, rich and poor. We sing and pray and read and listen and serve and give. Then, we leave, departing back into the rhythms of everyday life. However, when we gather again with a small cluster of other believers, we unite afresh. All over our county, real human beings are thinking and praying and applying the same timeless truth to their lives— that very same week!

3. It is accessible for everyone.

The insights of a new believer and a seasoned believer regarding the same text might vary wildly, they might not, but discussion of the previous Sunday's text and sermon means everyone can participate. If you were there on Sunday, or if you listened in, you can engage during group time. If you have limited experience in Scripture, you are not excluded, for you have just received a teaching about the very passage you'll discuss at your group. You are already reasonably familiar with the text, for you've read it and heard it explained. Moreover, what an older believer says about a passage is helpful to the younger believer, but what the newer believer says about it is also helpful to the mature believer.

4. It leads to an increased application of Scripture.

It is easy to read a passage, hear a teaching, and forget all about it by the next day's breakfast. But sermon-based small groups build in time for us to come back to the passage and teaching and see how the Holy Spirit might want to apply it into our lives. Is there something I must put on or put off? Is there a lie I must no longer believe? Is there faith I should exhibit? Rather than feel warmed by a message and then move on, we are forced to think twice about the Word. We speak of teachings that "move" us, but shouldn't movement signify more than feelings? Shouldn't emotion turn into action?

5. It creates pathways for qualified leaders.

Small group models which require the leader to teach a Bible study experience a couple of obstacles. First, not many people have the tools and gifts to teach a good sermon, so the number of groups will be limited. Second, the type of person who would like to spend hours in study to prepare themselves to teach a good Bible study is often not very good at corralling and relating to a group of people, so the groups often lose their relational flair. Third, though qualified teachers are a gift to the church and Christ is continually raising them up, it is a labor intensive project to generate more Bible teachers. Not everyone should do it. But leading a small group discussion, though it requires equipping and biblical knowledge, does not necessitate strong hermeneutical or homiletical skill. What they do require, however, is a willingness to love, learn, and lead a group of people. In a sense, life groups are the messiest ministry in our church because real people are taking real shots at caring for other brothers and sisters in Christ.

6. It encourages listening to online Bible teaching.

Often, for various reasons, people who attend a group missed the previous Sunday. Instead of being left out of the discussion time, they are encouraged to listen to the teaching online before their group meets. We work hard to post the sermon online by Sunday afternoon, so there is plenty of time to listen in before the groups gather. We place the teachings on our church website, on YouTube, in all podcast stores, and on our church app. I think we even burn a few CDs on Sunday if people would like a physical copy or are intimidated by the digital world. All this is done for the sake of the group meeting and the individual's personal growth, but I like that a habit of listening to Bible teaching during the week is encouraged through this practice. Man cannot live on bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God. I love Sunday teachings, but could not live off one teaching interaction with God's word per week. I need more. In addition to personal Bible reading, I am thankful for podcasts and books which nourish my inner man, so I am glad people in our church are encouraged to adopt a similar practice.

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