

Church and City Groups

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[0 : 00] I'm going to look at several different texts this evening, kind of to help us in our thoughts this evening. If you're visiting with us, I hope you'll bear with us.

It's quite an intimate discussion this evening. It's about the way we're going as a church. It's about why we do church. It's about why we're doing small groups as well.

And at the moment, we're looking to broaden and change them and involve more of the congregation in all that we do as a church, both in the central church here and also when we meet together for small groups.

So I'm looking really at that whole question of why we're wanting to develop what I'm wanting to call our city groups as well as our community here in the city center.

And look at that kind of more with principles, I hope, from the Bible tonight. And then hopefully next Sunday, look more at practical issues. But what I want to do is say a few things in terms of what the Bible teaches.

[1 : 05] And then I'm going to ask Neil to get up and say a few things about the church group that he's involved with, which is kind of going to be an extension outreach work from the church as well.

Neil's going to say a bit about that. It will finish with praise. But then if you want to stay, then feel free to stay, because I'm just going to go through a short PowerPoint presentation just about the practicalities a little bit.

And then you'll be free then to ask questions. I'll not be long, just a brief thing. But I would like, at least, the leaders and the training leaders that we hope to have and others to stay for that.

So please, if you want to, stay please do. But please don't feel obliged to either. The one or two biblical truths. And first of all, I want to go to Genesis chapter one.

I'm going to get you to look up a few verses with me this evening if you can keep alert to that. I was preaching this afternoon, as you know, from the Chinese church. And I asked them all to look up their Bibles.

[2 : 05] And none of them had Bibles, but they all had computerized laptop, not laptop, but Pam-top things. And they all had their Bibles in there. So it's very high tech church. So this is a very low tech church.

You've all got Bibles and paper. Some of you might have Bibles that you can scroll up as well.

That's good. Genesis 1, 26 and 27.

Then God said, let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air over the livestock, over the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him male and female. He created them. And it's just by very basic way of introduction in terms of community and being together as a people that we do that because it reflects the nature and the character of God, that God is a Trinitarian community.

It's a very important central truth that we believe in, that we're not like Jehovah's Witness or other cults that would speak about God being unitary, being one.

[3 : 19] We believe he is both three and one. We believe that he is not a soul individual in a lonely heaven and that he somehow created humanity to give him someone to speak to, but that he is a perfect, internalised, powerful, complete fellowship of being, that he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God, a unique, complex being, a being of society, a being who is in community with himself.

So he himself as a being is in community and he calls us to be in fellowship and community with him. I think we struggle and I've always struggled with the concept of God at that level.

We've struggled to put it into language. We've struggled with that, the Trinity itself, the term we use isn't a biblical one. It's not found anywhere in the Bible, but it's simply a way to try and explain what is expressive, what is presented to us in Scripture about the character of God that people worship Jesus.

People recognise the Spirit as God's Spirit, as a divine being and of himself, one who could be rejected and who can be offended and who can be crushed, quenched and resisted and also God the Father as we recognise him in his being.

So we see and know and recognise that in this pure relationship of equals there is in its own intensity and completeness, community.

[5 : 12] So God is a trinity in community and we see that reflected in His creation, in the creation of humanity. In the image of God He created the male and female He created them.

And it's in family, it's in community. It's in male and female together, not exclusively in marriage as is at least implied to a degree here, but at a wider level, humanity not being alone.

The man not being alone but belonging and being in relationship, in community, in family is a reflection of the nature and the character of God.

There's lots we could talk about in there and there's lots of difficulties within that as well. But it is a reflection of the nature of God, this unity and this community and this giving to one another in community, whether that be in a Christian community, in family, in church, however, that is expressed very often.

What we have experienced in life through our rebellion from God and turning away from God is loneliness and selfishness.

[6 : 46] We've been the recipients of selfish behavior from others and we've engaged in selfish behavior ourselves so that the community is broken and relationships are divorced and individualism flourishes and friction can be created.

There's a rightful place for individuality as well, of course, we'll maybe speak about that a little bit more next week. But we recognize and see that at the very core of our breaking faith and relationship with God was that the family unit knew brokenness and mistrust and division and very soon hatred and murder.

So it's reflected in God's initial and original creation. But as we see and recognize that that sin's greatest disease is separation, isn't it, and hurt and pain, not only separation between ourselves and God, but separation one from another.

It's so strange, isn't it, when we read the news and you see nearly every headline is about murder and terrorism and mistrust, brokenness, innocent children slaughtered.

And it seems just so completely bizarre. But we recognize also that that friction, that fraction, that division is healed in Christ and is healed and begins to be healed in Christ so we enjoy perfect community with Him again.

[8 : 38] And that is in a powerful verse in 1 Peter chapter 2. It's quite often quote I think here. 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 10, 1, it's on page 123, 128.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. God saves us into community. Now the evangelical, the evangelistic and evangelical message very often of Western Europe has been and is that God must save you and you must come to Christ and you must be redeemed and you must be saved and you must come down to the front and you must give your life to Christ. And it's very individualistic. And that's not wrong. We must know an individual relationship with Jesus Christ, but it's not all the picture.

It's not just that we do our business eyeball to eyeball with God. We do that, but He saves us then into His family.

[9 : 55] It's a reconciliation with God and to one another. We're not just saved individuals. We don't just have the prayer of salvation offered over us and then we go back to our own lives the same as we were.

There is selfishness and there is insularity, spiritual and otherwise, that is healed and dealt with by Christ. And the outworking of our salvation is very often and almost exclusively worked out in community.

Not just our own personal healing, but it's worked out. It's worked in our hearts, but it's worked out with others.

Does that make sense? That may just be a bit of a mix of words together, but I know what I mean if you don't. It's worked in our hearts. Salvation is Christ changes us from within.

We get from within, we get life and we get forgiveness and we get belonging direction, but that peace, that salvation, it is worked out in a relationship with others first and foremost among the people of God.

[11:07] It's simply not good enough for us to say, well, Christ has saved me, but to pot with the church because they're a bunch of nutters.

Because we are saved into community. And the outworking of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, making us self-control, forgiveness, all these things.

They're not worked out in a vacuum. They're worked out in a relationship with others, and that involves commitment. It involves sacrifice. It involves patience.

It involves going the extra mile. It involves being inconvenienced. It involves serving, and it involves, of course, reward as well.

Tremendous reward, tremendous community. But it does cost. It is reflected in the cost of Jesus for our sins.

[12:06] Jesus didn't say, oh, well, there are rubbish bunch of people. I'm not going to go to the cross for them. It's too costly. He goes that tremendous extent in order to redeem us, and we reflect that.

Not so much with Christ, because it's easy to love Christ. He's perfect. We can all love Christ. We can all worship Christ and serve Christ. He's beautiful. He doesn't let us down.

He doesn't hurt us unnecessarily. He doesn't abandon us. He doesn't walk away from us. It's our fellow Christians that do that. And these are the ones that we're called to love and to serve and to be among.

So we see and we recognize that God saves us into community and heaven, where we're all going, by grace, is described as a crowd.

It's described as a city. We read two passages there about heaven being described as a city, a people, a community.

[13:13] And in Revelation 7, it speaks about a multitude that no one can number before the throne. A great crowd. Now, I know there are sometimes here we need solitude.

Sometimes we just need to get away, don't we, from a crowd. Sometimes we don't like a crowd particularly much. I think that's absolutely right. Jesus needed that. Jesus went to be solitary, as it were, with God, needed rest.

We're charging. I do think we all need that. But I'm not sure if there's any concept of solitude in heaven, and I'm not sure if there's any concept of a Christian who simply lives in solitude here.

I know we need solitude, but it's in order to be back in the crowd. Christ needed solitude in order to be back among the people.

Heaven starts here, the crowd starts here, and that requires, from some of us more than others, a great deal of grace and a great deal of bending our will to what Christ wants.

[14:31] Some of us are maybe naturally more sociable than others, more patient, more compassionate. But all of us are asked to bend our will to Christ, and we are saved into people.

So we see the church in different ways. Matthew 24, 14, I'll just say this quickly. Matthew 24, I could have chosen various texts for this, but Matthew 24 and verse 14, Jesus says, in the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come, where the church is seen as a kingdom.

And we look this morning at Matthew's gospel, and that all speaks about the gospel and the church as a kingdom. And so it's a kingdom to be citizens of, to belong to, something big, something much bigger than ourselves, something that is significant, something that is linear.

It started, it's developing, and it's going to come to fruition in heaven. And that gives us a sense of perspective, we belong to a kingdom. I hope that gives us encouragement.

It's not just our own very small congregation here, but there's visitors tonight from different parts of the world, and they're representing the kingdom, which we belong to as well.

[15:55] It's a kingdom we hope has influenced. God's plan has been outworked in this kingdom, of which the church is a description. But also the church is a family.

It's not just a kingdom. There's different pictures, isn't there, in the Bible of what the church is. And one of them is the church as a family. And in Galatians chapter 6, at verse 10, it says, therefore, we have an opportunity, therefore, sorry, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So I think there's two different aspects. There's the church as a big worldwide kingdom, but there's also the church as a family, something more intimate, something more personal.

Jesus had His 12 disciples of whom He had an inner group of three, those whom we do life with, those who we can develop intimacy among, accountability to, care, and belonging around.

So church is a kingdom, and church is also a family, among other illustrations. So what we are trying to do here, what we're looking at, we don't have any great strategy.

[17 : 13] It kind of rumbles on as God opens up to us as we live our lives in the church. But our aim is really to do both.

It's to try and reflect the kind of kingdom reality of the church by growing here and being a big church. And I'm speaking, obviously, relatively.

We want to do big church, and we also want to do small church. We want to do family. We want to do kingdom life. We also want to do family life as a church.

But if all that we're aiming to do is just have a big church, so we fill all the pews, and we fill over in here, and it's overflowing, and we tell everyone about a massive church. It's just big. Then it can become just kind of a bit business-like.

It can be hard to care for one another if it's just a big church. It can become very impersonal. You can go from week to week unnoticed in a big church.

[18 : 13] No one cares if you're there. No one notices. It can be great sometimes if you are hiding. It can be very superficial, difficult to get beyond, hello, how are you as you pass 20 or 30 people on the way down to tea and coffee?

It's difficult to use people's gifts. Easy for them to be neglected. Easy to be a passenger. Easy not to be challenged, not to be accountable. It can become a worldly thing, a big church.

It can become a powerful social enterprise where its influence can be abused. But if it's just small, then that can be discouraging.

And the few that are serving in a just small church can get burnt out. It's easy to lose perspective when you're just with a small group all the time. Forget the kingdom realities.

One or two people in just a small group can have an undue influence. Sometimes we're good, sometimes we're bad.

[19 : 22] There simply isn't variety there. So just big and just small can have its issues. So what we're wanting to do is to develop the city center work of the church here and to see, under God, to see people coming to Christ and being converted.

But we also want to see city groups developing from the church that allow for the intimacy and community and the use of gifts and the accountability and the closeness that family can offer.

So it's a bit of both to have encouragement from being a big, and it's great to be a big group. We are speaking very, very relatively here.

Maybe people visiting you come from a church of 2,000 and we are really very small. But it's all relative, isn't it? So if we have 150 in church, 140 in church, in the morning we're looking for our groups to have maybe 12 or 13.

So there's the best of both that we come together and also that we are in small groups. And we recognize and see that it's in these small group environments that evangelism is also most effective.

[20 : 43] Where mission is best placed to take place. So we're moving from just at the moment four groups to seven groups, we hope obviously that that is flexible and it can develop.

We're having a group in Brunfield which Neil's heading up, which you'll see a wee bit about in a second, which is to have that particular mission of outlook and aspect to help us to look beyond ourselves, to remember the kingdom, the citizenship mission that we have, which is to worship the king that we saw this morning, to live for the king and also to share the king.

But we're also hoping to have groups in Marchman and Gorgie and Newington and East and Gilmerton and Leith and Cursedorfen. And the congregation will be delegated into these different groups.

We're not going to encourage the students to be very much part of these groups rather than be separate or kind of randomly be placed in the groups that are going to do it geographically. So some groups will probably have more students than others because the students all tend to stay in the same parts of the city. And so that's the kind of model that we hope to develop.

[22 : 04] Not neglecting the city center, not abandoning that, not going wholeheartedly for small, separate groups.

And both and rather than either or. And we pray and hope that that is what God wants for us. And certainly prayerfully what we've been seeking to do.

Now I just want Neil to come up and say a few words about specifically the Brunfield situation. And next week we'll look at the church and the individual and also some practical issues.

Thanks, Stephen.