

“One Anothering”
Series: Catalysts for Spiritual Growth
Acts 2:42-47, Romans 12:1-8, 10-18

One evening back in 1989 – I think it was a Tuesday – I gathered for the first time with a group of folks who would soon become among the most important people in my life. After hearing so much about how wonderful they were, I had finally signed up to be in a Covenant Group, as we called small groups at our home church. After signing up, I thought, “Oh, great. Just when do you think you’re going to have time for another weekly commitment?” I mean, I was as busy as you all are: full-time job, four kids at home, very involved at church, etc., etc., etc. That group was quite a diverse one: a mixture of couples and individuals, married and not, older and younger. We began to meet together weekly, studying the Bible together, sharing what was going on in our lives, praying for one another, having fun together. There is no doubt in my mind that that group of people, and the subsequent small group that Paul and I joined together, were among the tools God used to get me through one of the most difficult times of my life, and to prepare me for my calling to be a pastor.

There is nothing – nothing, no Bible study, no seminary class, no worship experience, no experience in ministry or mission – nothing – that has helped me grow as a follower of Jesus more than the experience of community in a small group. And I’m not unique. Many of you could stand say the same thing about your small group. The catalyst for spiritual growth I want to talk about today is community, specifically, community as it is experienced through participation in a small group. I believe the best way to experience community as God intends Christ-followers to enjoy it, is through a small group. Here at Covenant, we call them L.I.F.E. Groups.

LIFE stands for “Living in Faith Everyday.” LIFE Groups are not the *only* way to experience community, but I believe they are far and away the *best* way. A LIFE Group is an intentional, face-to-face meeting of 4-12 people gathering weekly or every other week for study, prayer, and sharing their lives. Now, since the beginning of the year, we’ve been speaking about various practices that are catalysts for spiritual growth. Things you can *do* that will help you grow in your relationship with God. To that end, we’ve shared this continuum. And we’ve invited you to identify where you are now on it. Are you Exploring Christ? You believe in God but are not sure about Jesus. You would say that right now your faith is not a significant part of your life. Are you Growing in Christ? You believe in Jesus and you’re working on what it means to get to know Him. Maybe you feel really Close to Christ and you depend on Him daily for guidance. There may be a few of you who are living a Christ-Centered life: You recognize that God is all you need and everything you do is a reflection of Christ. *Where are you now? Where do you want to be?*

Let me be clear: If you are a regular attender or member of this church, or if you’re thinking about becoming one, you should know this: We expect you to grow. We expect you to move along this journey. This is not the church for you if all you want to do is come on Sunday and get a blessing to help you get through the week. We hope you do that, but we want so much more for you. No matter where you are when you come here, we desire more than anything else that you grow spiritually. In fact, I’d like to think that everything we do here is designed to help you move along this continuum of spiritual growth. EVERYTHING. Maybe you’re not even on the

journey yet. Maybe you're still trying to make up your mind about Jesus. That's okay. We hope you will connect with someone or something here that will get you on the path of Exploring Christ. If you are on the journey, our plan is that you move from Growing, to Close, to Christ-centered.

So far we've talked about the catalysts of Reflecting on the Word of God in the Bible, Prayer, Fasting, and Giving. All of these catalysts can be done alone, privately, individually. But you see, once you decide to follow the ways of Jesus, you're not on your own anymore. At least, you're not supposed to be. Now, I'm not going to say what I always say about that white-suited masked man. But as a follower of Jesus, you are called to belong, not just believe. Right from the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, we see that God Himself exists in community: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. One God, three persons – together. And we are created in the image of God. We are created to live in deep, intimate community with others.

In all the magnificent world that God created – sun and moon, plants and trees and animals and human beings – there was only *one thing* that was not good, according to God. God created the light and He said, "It's good." God created the sun and the moon and He said, "It's good." God created the fish and the birds and He said, "It's good." The only thing in all creation that *wasn't* good was this: It was not good that the man should be alone. It is not good for human beings to be alone. You were created for community.

Acts 2:42-47. Romans 12:4-5, 10. John 13:34-35. Here's what the New Testament tells us about how Christ-followers are supposed to live: We are to be devoted to fellowship with one another. Honor one another above ourselves. Live in harmony with one another. Accept one another. Instruct one another. Agree with one another. Serve one another in love. Bear with one another. Be kind and compassionate to one another. Submit to one another. Forgive one another. Admonish one another. Encourage each other. Spur one another on to love and good deeds. Confess our sins to each other and pray for each other. Offer hospitality to one another.

Now, let me tell you something. That all sounds very nice, but on your own power, you will never be able to live in this kind of community with other people. On your own power, you won't even want to, choose to. I mean, let's face it, we can't even do it within our own homes, most of the time, let alone with other people. And yet, God commands us to live this way. God never tells you to do something you are not capable of doing. Connection to a small group of people with whom you can develop deep spiritual friendships is how you will learn to "one another." How you will learn to truly love one another. And Jesus said that *this* is how people will know we are His followers: when they can see us love one another.

Not when they see us go to church. Not when they see us serve on a committee or make a large donation to charity. When they see us love one another. Here's the thing: You can't love one another by yourself. And you can't "one another" this whole group, either. It's too big. To be honest, you won't even be able to *like* everybody in this whole group. You need a smaller group to experience authentic, biblical community. You need a smaller group to "one another."

In the research that produced this continuum we've been showing you, participation in a small group was among the most significant catalysts for growth in moving from Exploring to

Growing AND Growing to Close to Christ. So this isn't just my opinion. This isn't just anecdotal information from a few people I know. This is supported by sophisticated analytical research with over 157,000 people in more than 500 churches. So here's what I believe: I believe and I desire with all my heart that everybody connected with Church of the Covenant should be connected to a L.I.F.E. Group. Because I believe that if that were to happen, we'd see God do amazing and almost unbelievable things in us as individuals and through us as a church family. I believe that, the more people we have in LIFE Groups, the more lives would be changed. And if our lives are changed, our families will be changed, our neighborhoods will be changed, our schools and workplaces will be changed, our cities, even our world will be changed. That's what we're about, church. *Changed lives*. Let me be clear: Changing lives by the power of the Holy Spirit is what we're ultimately about.

Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* The "pattern of this world" is the isolated, white-suited, masked man [PHOTO] pattern. Rugged individualism. I don't need anybody else. Self-centered, self-serving, I want what I want when I want it. The pursuit of personal happiness. That's the culture we live in and even celebrate. But the Bible says, "Each member belongs to all the others" in the body of Christ, the church. So that means 'mind your own business' is not a Christian phrase. You cannot truly follow Christ without community. It's just not an option. Doesn't matter that you're an introvert. And not just large-group community as we have here – you need the kind of community where you can be *devoted* to one another, the Word, prayer, *together*.

Now I know all the reasons and excuses people have for not signing up right now to be in a LIFE Group. The primary one is that little four-letter word: TIME. I have had many people tell me they'd really like to be in a LIFE Group, but they can't possibly commit to a weekly or every other week LIFE Group meeting. But *without exception*, every time I've been successful in getting someone who says that to trust me and try it, they come back to me and say they don't know how they ever lived without it. Every time. We need a place where we can truly be ourselves in the company of a few other faithful people. We need the spiritual accountability, truth-telling, and listening to God that are priorities in a small group.

One evening recently, a member of one of our LIFE Groups was on their way to the hospital to see their mother-in-law who is quite ill, and called one of the leaders of their group to give an update on the situation and ask for prayer. Another member of the group went to the hospital. That's one anothering. When Amy T. was stuck in London, we gathered to pray. That's one anothering. When Paul and I went through very significant marital difficulties, people prayed for us by name daily. They cared for us, gave Scripture verses to encourage us. That's one anothering.

LIFE Groups are not just social clubs. At least, they're not meant to be. If you're in one that has become that, you either need a new group or your group needs a tune up. Let me know, and I can hook you up with one of our LIFE Group coaches. If you want to try out this thing called a LIFE Group, please indicate that on the insert and put it in the offering basket/plate. Paul and I will be starting a new group soon. And some of our current groups have room to grow.

Now, I know that some of you are still thinking you could never do this, don't even want to try it, you like your life the way it is. If this is you, let me lovingly ask you to just reflect a bit on these questions:

- Why are you avoiding the experience of deep, intimate community?
- What is your reason or excuse for not connecting with others through a small group?
- What are you willing to do to grow closer to Christ?

We can't force you to join a LIFE Group. All I can do is encourage you in the strongest possible terms to TRUST ME and try it. God won't love you any less if you are not in a small group. But if you *are feeling* God nudging you, if you are thinking, "This may be just what I need, what I've been looking for," *please don't let your fears or concerns stop you* from pursuing the life Jesus died to give you. If you want to grow closer to Jesus, you need community. If we want to grow as a church – if we want to more and more reflect Christ to the world as our Mission Statement says – we need to "one another" one another.

At the second service, we're going to sing an African-American spiritual called, "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me." "I want Jesus to walk with me... In my trials, Lord, walk with me... When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me. All along my pilgrim journey, when my heart is almost breaking, when my head is bowed in sorrow, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me." Friends, this is one of the ways Jesus walks with us all along the journey, when your head is bowed in sorrow and your heart is almost breaking.

I've experienced Jesus walking with me in difficult times through the members of my small group. Jesus walks with us as we live in deep, intimate community with others who love Him. Jesus walks with us as we walk together.