

Before I came to Waite Park Church, I was starting to develop some strong convictions about what churches should prioritize. I'm going to share some of them with you today because before we talk about whether or not small groups are biblical, we need to talk about whether or not they're necessary.

So here were some of my thoughts about what churches should **prioritize** and I trust that they'll resonate with you as well.

1. The Week is more important than the Weekend.

My friend posted a picture of his youth group at a favorite hangout spot for the locals. What caught my eye was this typographical wall art they had that said **"Open 24 hours. 7 days a week. 365 days a year."**

Immediately I felt inspired and I texted the picture to my friend followed by the words **"this should be church."** Meanwhile, I had just finished updating our church's marquee sign that read (somewhat ironically) **"YOU ARE ALWAYS WELCOME HERE. SUNDAYS 9:30 & 10:45AM."** I was sad and at the same time, inspired.

It seems absurd for us to buy into a model of church where Sunday is a time for Christians to get poured into, fed, and sent out in order to survive the secular world for the next 6 days - just so we can start all over again the following Sunday. But how many churches seem to operate out of this mentality? Is that what Jesus died for? Is that what he hoped for his disciples? For his people?

Sunday morning should be the culmination of a weeklong life of faith lived out and shared together. What we do the other 166 hours of the week matters.

2. Training is more important than entertaining

I heard a pastor once compare churches to **soccer matches**. He noted that often times there's thousands of people sitting in the stands in desperate need of exercise while they cheer for 22 exhausted people on the field in desperate need of relief.

The New Testament leaves no room for doubt in this matter. Each one of us is uniquely gifted. As members of one body we are to perform a specific role, a specific function and we have been given the responsibility to steward grace to one another. Do you know that one of the main reasons people stop going to church is because they feel like they aren't needed? People aren't interested in idly standing by. Christianity was never meant to be a spectator sport.

I've even heard of churches having an "at the movies" sermon series where the congregation is given popcorn and soda and they watch a video clip. At the end of it, that pastor provides a spiritualized interpretation. Pastor Francis Chan recently posed the question, "Is your church more like a movie theatre or more like a gym?" In other words, is your church a place where you go to be entertained, encouraged, and to consume? Or is your church a place where you go to train and be equipped?

3. Transformation is more important than attendance

I visited a shut-in once who proceeded to tell me, "When I go to **heaven I'll be in a log cabin** by the lake and it will always be Fall, the air will always be crisp but the water will always be warm." What's the problem? She was entirely convinced that all of eternity was all about her. She was at the center

of her faith. She had grown up in church all of her life, had near perfect Sunday morning attendance, and yet remained unchanged. And because she showed up to church and sat in the pew and nodded her head when she was supposed to - she went unchallenged.

There was a woman at my last church who came up to me one day and she said, "Pastor Keith, I feel like I've plateaued in my faith and I just haven't been growing for a while. I was wondering if I could get involved in youth ministry. Is there a way that I could serve somehow?" My response to her was, "There are definitely ways that you can serve but if you really want to grow, you should get an accountability partner." She said, "God is my accountability partner." A few months later she left her husband for a man she had been having an affair with for her entire marriage.

Listen guys, God is a terrible accountability partner. Filling a pew and keeping your faith private will never result in life change. A person can go to church all their life and still look the same that they did twenty years prior. Getting someone to sit through a church service can't be the priority. Transformation has to be the priority.

Don't get me wrong -transformed people will go to church and they'll bring others to church. But church goers might never be transformed and might never bring others to church.

4. Community is more important than Consumerism

When you read the New Testament accounts of the early church in Acts and the epistles that follow, you don't see any hint of encouraging consumerism. There's no matching t-shirts. No coffee handout. No free car washes. No creative clickbait sermon series. No billboards. No trending of hashtags. No TV giveaways. I'm not saying that all of those things are evil. Waite Park Church does some of those things. I design some of those things. What I am saying is: What is our priority. What do we care most about?

What you see in the New Testament is people living in community together. Authentic. Relational. Genuine. Messy.

Pastor Francis Chan has on multiple occasions, told a story about a former gang member who was baptized at his church and I love repeating it. The former gang member came regularly for the first several Sundays and then eventually he came less and less until finally he stopped coming altogether. When someone from the church asked him why he hadn't returned he said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I just had the wrong impression. I thought that when I got baptized it would be like when I was initiated into a gang. I thought the church would become like my family and that people would have my back. I just had the wrong impression."

Guys. Girls. Listen. Gangs do a better job of community and family than the Body and Bride of Christ. Gangs. Doesn't that bother you? Let it bother you. Don't fight it.

Yet undoubtedly, community was a huge part of the early church.

Acts 2:46 "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts..."

Hebrews 10:25 "And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

I want to put to death clean, neat, consumeristic church and exchange it for dirty, messy, community.

Here's the deal... a church with a small group ministry reflects that.

Churches with small group ministries

1. Care more about the week than the weekend
2. Care more about training than entertaining
3. Care more about transformation than attendance
4. Care more about community than consumerism

But are small groups Biblical?

In a sense, I know this isn't the best question to ask because there are plenty of non-biblical things that are really good for us, right? Like using your windshield wipers when it's raining. So just because something isn't in the Bible doesn't necessarily negate it's importance.

Nonetheless, I want to take on the challenge of answering that question because I believe in small groups and because I believe that they are biblical and beneficial.

You know, I've heard people before mention that God is a small group – The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And of course we're made in the image of God and so we're made to exist in community. Even God says that He alone isn't enough for us when He looks at Adam and God is the one that says, "It's not good for man to be alone."

But those aren't the most compelling arguments.

You might've heard before that Jesus' small group was the best small group ever and maybe a comment like that makes you roll your eyes. It sounds hyperbolic. It sounds like an overemphasis, doesn't it? I get it. You're skeptical. Can we really call Jesus' disciples, a small group?

So... let's learn a little bit about Jewish culture together back in the day. **And what we're going to do is we're going to look at two different concepts.** One was the Yeshiva and the other is called the Havurah.

Let's start with **Yeshiva**.

A Yeshiva was a group of disciples who were **wrestling** over the meaning of a text and trying to determine how to live it out.

So in Mark 10 Jesus teaches about divorce and we're told in **verse 10** that the disciples wait until they get inside a home alone with Jesus and they ask him about the teaching and Jesus teaches them further.

In **Matthew 17:10** the disciples, alone with Jesus ask him why teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first, before the Messiah comes. They're wrestling over scripture together.

In **Matthew 13:36** we read: "36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

What's happening here? A Yeshiva. A Group of disciples wrestling over the text together and figuring out, "how do we think like our Rabbi, how do we live like our Rabbi?"

Rabbis didn't have curriculum. It was never about linear learning. Instead they preferred to share life with their disciples. And as the disciples would experience Need to Know moments and Need to grow moments their Rabbis would help them wrestle through those issues.

Small groups are the same way. When we're sharing life with a group of people we're bound to come to a point in our life where we reach a **"Need to know" moment** – where we experience doubt or are challenged by a Jehovah's witness or we're reading through our Bible and we don't understand a passage. Our small groups are there. Our Yeshiva is there. We also experience **"Need to Grow" moments** – we face temptation, we need help overcoming bitterness, someone depends on us to lead them – our small group provides us with a yeshiva. A group of disciples who will wrestle over the word of God with us and figure out together, "what does this mean, how do I apply it."

Now, you're probably thinking... a small group isn't really a Yeshiva. We're not really disciples getting together with our Rabbi when we're at our small group. Now let's look at the Great Commission. Jesus says at the end of Matthew "All authority in Heaven and Earth has been given to me therefore Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you."

What does Jesus ask for? **He asks for disciples. Not converts.** Jesus uses the word disciple and he has something specific in mind. His disciples heard the word "disciples" and they would've known exactly what Jesus was asking for. They would've immediately thought about their Yeshiva sessions, studying God's word, praying, and worshipping together.

They would've pictured something incredibly similar to a small group. Yes, they went to worship services with Jesus at the temple and at the synagogue but they also had their own small group yeshiva sessions together and it's in those sessions that they truly learned what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus.

And let me remind you of **Matthew 18:20** "Where two or three are gathered together in my name. There I am also." **When you meet with your small group, you are disciples, and your Rabbi is there.**

We said we were going to talk about two Jewish concepts. The other is called the **Havurah**.

When Jewish people ate the Seder meal together for Passover they had a **term** for the specific gathering of family and friends during this meal... this particular small group of people that you were celebrating with was called a havurah. It comes from a Hebrew word meaning friend and it **means "group" or "assembly."** Now bear with me - this small group of people were meeting together to study God's word, to eat together, to study God's work in their lives, to pray blessings upon each other, to sing worship together, and to share friendship. No joke. That's what they did during the Seder meal. And during the Seder meal they became a havurah.

By the time we get to Jesus the word had evolved. **Of the major Jewish sects in Jesus' time**, there were two – The Essenes and the Pharisees who were using the term Havurah to describe any group of friends who were regularly meeting together to study scripture, to pray, to worship God, and to share life with. And Havurot were plentiful in Jesus' time. Especially in Galilee.

So when Jesus says in **Matthew 18:20** "Where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst." He might have in mind a Havurah. What he definitely isn't talking about is simply two Christians in the same room together. John Wesley says that to gather in the name of Jesus is to gather for worship. To do something in the name of Christ generally means to do it according to His

authority. We pray in the name of Jesus because Jesus has authorized us to do so. So Jesus is talking about when two or three people gather together specifically to be the church – to pursue God, to worship, to love and serve others on behalf of Christ. What's Jesus talking about? He's talking about a small group in some sense and he's saying – I'm there. I'm with you. Get together in my name with even a few people because then you'll experience me in a way that you otherwise wouldn't.

The Jews have a rule that it takes 10 Jewish adult males to form a congregation. It looks as if Jesus is addressing this idea and saying, no, even just two people getting together in my name is My Body and I will be there.

So this is why I've called our sermon the third sacrament. Catholics have seven sacraments but Protestants have two (Communion and Baptism) and it's simply because we have different definitions for those words. For Protestants we consider something a sacrament if it:

- Has Physical elements
- Was instituted by Christ
- Was commanded for all Christians
- Is a means of grace (a time when we can expect God to be at work)

So I'm being a little hyperbolic in suggesting that small groups are a third sacrament yet at the same time, Jesus supports them, Jesus instituted them, Jesus said he would be present in a special way during them, Jesus commands all Christians to be a part of his church, and He sees it as a physical gathering. It's not "Oh I know a Christian who lives in Washington and we talk on the phone once a month or write encouraging letters together so we're together in the name of Jesus." No... where two or three have gathered together.

So this is the life the disciples knew. This is first century Judaism. Yeshivas and Havurahs.

Consider what comes next.

Remember what we said Havurah means... it means group, gathering, or assembly.

The most common and earliest word for Jesus' community of believers is... **Ekklesia**. Ekklesia was a secular greek word that meant "group, gathering, or assembly."

We translate Ekklesia to mean "church."

The Jewish word for small group means the same thing as the Greek word for church.

Right from the very beginning of the church Christians were meeting in small, local gatherings and usually in homes. This wasn't a passing fad. For the first **300** years of Christianity the church met in homes and during persecution they kept their meetings purposefully small to avoid detection.

The earliest church building we've ever discovered was built sometime around 232AD. 554 miles away from Jerusalem. It was a house that had a baptismal in it. One of the walls had been knocked down in order to make more room people and it would've fit at maximum 60 people at a time. Granted, that's a big small group but it's a small church. And chances are it wasn't at maximum capacity all the time.

There seems to be a New Testament pattern of Christians breaking bread together in each other's homes and also meeting together in larger groups for worship and teaching.

And we see that explicitly in **Acts 2** but we're also told in **Acts 16** that Paul goes to a recent convert's house (whose name was Lydia) to meet with and encourage the brothers and sisters there. We also learn about **Priscilla and Aquilla** who were tent makers like Paul. Due to their occupation they probably had a modest sized home and yet Paul, in his letter to the romans says to greet the church (the gathering, or assembly) that meets at their house. And there's evidence that Priscilla and Aquilla established multiple house churches within the same city. There's another passage in **Colossians 4:15** where Paul greets the brothers and sisters of a city and then specifically greets Nympha and the church or gathering that met in her house. It appears from Paul's letters that large groups of Christians in cities were being addressed and then on occasion smaller gatherings that met in homes were also being addressed in those same letters.

None of this would be surprising since Paul and the Apostles were Jews who knew what it meant to make disciples and were familiar with Yeshivas and Havurah's. They would've expected their people to be meeting regularly together outside of the synagogue and outside of larger group gatherings. It would've made perfect sense to the New Testament Christians to use the word Ekklesia to refer to Christ's church because that's how God's people manifested themselves most often.

I want to end by saying this. There are 59 some "One another" verses in the New Testament.

They say things like

"Wash one another's feet."

"Be Devoted to one another."

"Instruct One another."

"When you come together to eat, wait for one another."

"Serve one another in love."

"Carry one another's burdens."

"Be Patient with one another."

"Forgive one another."

"Submit to one another."

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."

"Spur one another on towards love and good deeds."

"Confess your sins to each other."

"Offer hospitality to one another."

If the New Testament believers were limiting themselves to gathering for an hour and a half on Sunday there is no way that these verses ever would've applied to those congregations. Look at that list for a minute. How many of those commands will you fulfill this morning? How many of those commands will you even have the opportunity to fulfill on any given Sunday morning for the next 6 months? **You cannot**

live out the New Testament expectations for believers in community if all you do is come on Sunday morning.

I'm not saying Sunday morning doesn't matter. There's a clear pattern of Christians meeting together on Sunday to collect an offering and worship and hear the word. It would've looked and felt a lot like our Church services today. But it's clear that they went beyond that.

If you're in a small group then treat it like the ancient practice that it is. See it as the disciples would've seen it – as a great privilege and help for a disciple of Jesus to live out their faith and help other disciples live out their faith. See it as your Yeshiva. Be there when other disciples in your Yeshiva have need to know and need to grow moments. See it as your Havurah – your gathering of friends who pursue God together through Word, Worship, and Friendship.

If you're not in a small group then consider how you might make time for one or plan for one in the future. Ask God if it's something he's asking of you.

If you're interested in joining a small group, you can talk to me after service, you can visit the small group table and grab a small group directory, grab a small group calendar, you can even email a leader.

We have three core values for our small group and you've heard me talking about them throughout this service. They're Word, Worship, and Friendship. And we believe that these three ingredients will lead to a transformed life for all of our members and through these three ingredients our members will be able to transform the lives of others.