

The Foundation of a Missional Community

a sermon in the series
A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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Romans 16:3-5, 10-11

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.

vs. 10-11 Greet Apelles, approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus. 11 Greet Herodion, my countryman. Greet those who are of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

What is the mission that Christ has given us? It is Jesus' last command, to make disciples. We know that a disciple isn't truly formed until he or she is making disciples, so the mission is to make disciples who make disciples.

What is a disciple? A disciple is someone who surrenders his or her life to following Christ in order to be like Jesus. This is biblical Christianity. It's so much more than praying to receive Jesus Christ and becoming a Christian knowing that when you die you will have a place in heaven reserved for you. It's literally following Jesus so you can be like Him. This is the ultimate goal of a transformed heart, that the image of Jesus would be reflected in us.

Although this definition has been around for the last 2000 years, most churches fail to disciple. We have miserably failed in making disciples. The failure is in large part due to a convergence of five attitudes that have shaped the modern church. Five things have come together at the same time that have literally cut the feet out from under the task of making disciples. The first principle or precept that has gained our attention is that there has been a great compromise of the Gospel. We know this thoroughly as we have addressed it many times so I won't take the time to do so this morning.

The second attitude that has taken place along with compromising the Gospel is that we have individualized the mission of making disciples. We've made it a very personal thing. It's not a corporate thing, it's a personal thing, and I'll talk more about that in a few moments.

The third principle is that we've defined discipleship as an academic affair, passing one piece of information from one person to another and that's the process of discipleship. That's so far from

the truth. Discipleship is much more than learning doctrine. Although learning truth is important and integral to discipleship, it's more than that.

The fourth principle is especially prevalent among evangelicals and that is that we have redefined the church as a place and event. We've thoroughly gone over that in this series so I'm not going to do that again now, you know what I'm talking about. We've defined church as an event that happens in this building at a particular time. That is not the Bible's definition of church.

Fifthly and lastly, we have centralized ministry within the "ordained." We have, for the most part, made people to think those who are qualified for ministry have gone through the rigorous effort of gaining ordination, theological knowledge, and only these are invested with the authority of ministry. That is certainly not New Testament. The Bible makes it clear that while God may call certain men to the ministry who are gifted with the ability to preach and teach others, the church needs many more gifts and ministries besides this. It's the major responsibility of those who have been called to full-time ministry to equip the body for the ministry of the local body.

These five principles have converged in our time, in our generation, and they have literally kept us from the task Jesus gave us.

Therefore, if we are going to make disciples that make disciples we must change and reject the five erroneous paradigms mentioned above.

Look at the text. It might seem unusual. What's with these greetings and the benedictory part of Paul's epistle? What are we supposed to get out of this? What I really want you to see is the word *house*. He says it three times. He says it in the fifth verse, "likewise, greet the church that is in their house." He's talking about Aquila and Priscilla who had been persecuted for the Gospel, risking their own lives to help Paul during his time of persecution. But here in the city of Rome, where they were located, they had a church in their house.

When you go to verses 10 and 11, Paul mentions two other men, Aristobulus and Narcissus, whom they are to greet. The word *household* means *family* so you might read that and think Paul wants people to greet the family of these men but that's not what he's saying. He's going back to what he said in verse five. He wants them to greet the church that meets in these two men's homes. These are the households; it was the local body that met in their houses regularly.

This is not strange to the New Testament church. For nearly 400 years, the church didn't meet in an auditorium and thrived quite well. In fact, they turned the world upside down. They informally met in homes or secluded areas. They met in small groups. The church in Rome did not meet at one particular time in one particular place. It was a logistic impossibility. There were too many believers. The finances were not there, besides to gather as a public worship service would have been prevented by persecution. It was against the law to do so.

Therefore they met in smaller groups and as a result the church thrived. It was no accident that they were meeting in homes and smaller groups, it was strategic. I believe this to be one of the reasons God chose this particular time in history to introduce His church, His bride to the world. There were other reasons, but this was a cultural reason that would further the Gospel and Gospel activity. They would meet in homes in a small and informal way, nothing regimented or programmed as we would have this morning. The center of attention would be around a table with a meal where they could minister and encourage one another. They practice those rhythms we discussed last week where they heard each other's stories, they discovered each other's weaknesses and strengths, and were able to create interdependency upon one another.

Now, I don't want anybody to misunderstand me. We're not suggesting in the least that we should shut down the services here or close the church property and start meeting in homes on Sunday mornings. Not at all. There are advantages of coming together here and meeting at one place at one time. A great advantage is what we see in the local church in the book of Acts chapter two. The Bible tells us that for a brief time, Christians were meeting in one place at one time, they were meeting in the temple and listening to the apostles teach. There is an advantage of getting all the believers together at one place at one time and listening to people who have been gifted to preach and teach the Word of God.

We don't want to shut that down. There is something about coming together in a larger group like this that is logistically impossible to do in a home, unless you have an extremely large home. To be able to sing and pray together is a great advantage. However, having said that, there are advantages that we are not experiencing by not gathering together in small communities of believers.

There is no way when we gather on a Sunday morning or evening that we can bear one another's burdens. We might hear and bear one or two but do we bear everybody's burden? Do you feel the freedom to really be able to take off the mask, unload the heart, and share everything that is going on in your life? Do you really feel comfortable enough to do that? Even if you did, if we had this many people trying and all trying to do that here this morning, how long would we be there? Sooner or later the physical strength and the emotional toil would wear upon us and we couldn't do the job adequately.

There are certain things God didn't expect the church to do in larger settings like this but He reserved them for the smaller setting. That's why I believe the early church was planted at the time it was because culture dictated they had to gather like this and they thrived as they became a literal community, a brotherhood, a fellowship that was interdependent.

If we are going to fulfill the elements of true discipleship, we must not abandon the advantages of gathering together at one place at one time, but we also must pursue the advantages that come in smaller settings and groups, so that we may be able to accomplish true discipleship.

I want to give you four requirements from the New Testament for you and I to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.

I. The Requirements of True Discipleship

A. Life by the Gospel.

A Gospel-orientation must permeate everything the church does as it obeys the Lord. We must live by the Gospel.

You may be thinking: We do that, don't we? We're committed to the Gospel. It's one of our hallmarks and distinctives. We believe in the full Gospel of sovereign grace and the supernatural power of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. We believe that someone is saved when they place their faith in Christ. We understand justification and we believe that he who is justified will also be sanctified by that same grace and then finally they will be glorified.

Yes, we believe all of those points of God's saving grace, that is the Gospel.

But friends, I'm not just talking about doctrinal purity. Remember those five points we talked about just a moment ago? Those five points that have converged at the same time? When I said a misunderstanding of the Gospel, no doubt everyone in this room thought I was talking about doctrinal integrity, addressing false gospels and easy believism and these other problems. Certainly I am, but that's not all. You can be doctrinally sound about the Gospel, know it backward and forward and all the finer points, and still misunderstand it. What do I mean?

I mean the Gospel is not just a doctrinal precept we adopt and adhere to intellectually. The Gospel is the way we live. It's what dictates how we live. It's not just agreeing to a theological proposition, it's much more than that. The Gospel frames and motivates and influences every aspect of our lives. Every part is to be lived by this one pervading question: How does the Gospel address this part of my life?

Yesterday is a perfect example of this. In our men's breakfast, Brother Bobby asked us what husbands and wives do when there is conflict in the home. How do we approach reconciliation? The question was profitable. Some gave some outstanding answers but some included trying harder or doing this or that and it reached some form of moralism that Bobby was trying to avoid. The overarching theme when it comes to conflict with spouses or anyone else is the Gospel. The first question that ought to be asked when you and your spouse have a difference of opinion should be this: What does the Gospel say about this right now? How you answer that question is crucial. And how do you answer it?

For example: Let's say that right now my wife and I are in disagreement. How do I approach reconciliation? Do I find some technique taught in a book, some human effort of peacemaking? Or do I simply pray about it?

No, I look to the Gospel. I ask myself how does the Gospel apply itself to my and my wife's situation. Well, I remember that the Bible says that Jesus loved the church and gave Himself for it.

Now my question is not so much how I should love my wife, the question is how does Jesus love me? And from the Gospel I see that He loves me undeservedly. He loved me even when I did not want reconciliation, while I was still an enemy.

Do you see the point? If your focus is on what *you* are to do, well then, you've got it all wrong and you've nothing more than moralism and legalism, an act of works. The question isn't what you do when you're in conflict with someone; the question is what did Jesus do when you were in conflict with Him? When I ask myself that question, I see that He loved me. He served me. He gave Himself for me. He treated me with lovingkindness and long-suffering. He wasn't vengeful or wrathful but kind and loving.

As you focus on the love of Jesus for you when you have been disagreeable to Him your heart is filled with love. God ministers to you in that moment and you are able to love your spouse. Now the Gospel is ruling your heart, not the worry of whether you're right or wrong, not the grip of how offended you are or pride. That's what I mean by life by the Gospel. Until the Gospel goes from our heads into our everyday life and rules how we live, we are still misunderstanding the Gospel.

The Gospel is not something you write down on paper and put in your back pocket with the intentions of memorizing. The Gospel isn't just to be mastered but is to master your life. This is life by the Gospel.

B. Life on Life.

What does that look like? Jesus lived a life that was accessible. Can you imagine Jesus, when calling the disciples, saying something like this, "Now guys, we're going to meet once a week on Sabbath morn for a couple of hours and then, well, you'll go back to your families and jobs and I'll attend to My activities, but then on the following Sunday we'll meet for a couple more hours and in this you will learn to be My disciples."

That's so crazy to think about it's ridiculous to suggest such a thing. We can't even fathom Him saying something like that. His whole life was lived publicly with these men. He hid nothing from them. His whole life was an open book. They ate with Him, lived with Him, saw Him in high-pressure situations, they saw Him in tender moments with people who were down and out and hopeless, they saw His life. They had perfect access. He never closed the door to them. That's what we're talking about with this life on life mentality.

How is the disciple going to see how he or she should live if they can't see our life in its different facets? If we simply make discipleship intellectual, something we teach—a Bible truth or doctrine—and make theologians out of everybody, we've not successfully made disciples. Dispensing information is necessary, I'm not demeaning it, but if that's all we do we haven't given you the necessary components of being a disciple of Jesus. You need life on life. You need to see someone live this Gospel out in different scenarios and circumstances.

Here's our problem, and it's exactly what we inadvertently do when we're discipling somebody, we teach them there is a church life—that's one compartment—and then there's their family life—that's another compartment—and then they've got their jobs and career life and, if they have time for anything else, there are the additional pursuits. We compartmentalize life. Jesus didn't do that. The Apostle Paul didn't do that.

I've told this story so many times I'm sure I'm boring you with it, but for years and years I didn't really know what it meant to make disciples. I thought it was purely having a 13-week Bible study and calling it "discipleship." But as I began to realize this was something missing in my life as well as the ministry I began to pursue what it looked like to make disciples and God began to give me some disciples. We led them to the Lord and began to disciple them but I made a big mistake. I didn't bring them into the classroom and teach them out of some study guide, but what I did was not much different. We gathered around a table for a couple of hours each week, occasionally we'd get together and just hang out, but not often. I made a fatal flaw in their discipleship process because, and I'm being honest, I just didn't want to do it. I was too busy and I like my own private time. I've got my business hours and then I've got my personal hours. I've had to go back to some of those men and apologize not for the theology but in the way I modeled it.

If you're going to really disciple someone to see what Jesus looks like in you, you're going to have to pay the price of investment. In order to invest you first must divest. Which means you have to throw some things overboard and get rid of some of the things that are weighting down your boat. You lighten your load so you can bring people into your life. That's what life on life is all about.

I'm sorry to use myself as an illustration. I don't mean for it to be self-serving although I'm sure it appears that way. I want to illustrate this again with things I've learned over the years. Once again I want to refer to yesterday's men's breakfast. Again, Bobby did an ample job leading us during that time of study and discussion. Afterward he and I were talking. As tears welled up in his eyes, Bobby said, "You taught me a lot of things when you taught me from the Scriptures, but when you and Karen began to open up your home to Tina and me and have us over regularly, it was then I really learned as I watched you. I watched you serve her and honor her and deal with her. I appreciate everything you taught me as far as the information was concerned but what I saw had the greater impact."

That's what life on life looks like. That's its purpose. That's the reason for it. A man can stand up here and be slick. He can be professional and have all his ducks in a row and say the right things but his life be in shambles. Many years ago when Paul Harvey was still alive and on the radio, he had a segment on why preacher's kids usually don't follow the Lord when they get older and one of the reasons was—I'll never forget hearing this—"because daddy's not the same at home as he is in the pulpit." That's one of the reasons they become disillusioned and do not serve the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, I can be thoroughly Scriptural and doctrinally sound but my responsibilities don't end with this pulpit. I have to bring those truths down to a level that is visible in the way I

live. That includes mistakes. That includes letting people see the process because the process is natural. True discipleship has to be a natural process and if it's natural there's going to be mistakes made. Why? Because we're not perfect.

Jesus is the exception. He discipled Peter, James, John, and the others, but I guarantee you that when they began to disciple others they didn't do it perfectly. That's part of the process because in our imperfections they can see how the Gospel works for people who still need it. That's what we mean with life on life. If teaching theology is what we do, we've done well, but if it's all we do, we have not fulfilled the Great Commission.

C. Life in Community.

Community is a buzzword we've heard for the last couple of years. What do we mean by *community*? We've defined and explained it but let's see if we can come from a different perspective to get a better grasp on what it means.

Discipleship requires relationship, but it requires more than one relationship. This is one of my mistakes with some of those young men early on. Their discipleship process was basically me discipling them one-on-one. I've since learned that I cheated those men in making it that way. Sometimes it has to be one-on-one and it's necessary, but it cannot stay there because one person doesn't have it all. One person does not have all the gifts. There's not one person among us who has all the gifts and is perfectly like Jesus in every respect. Jesus could do discipleship perfectly because He was the perfect man. He had every part of the personality stratum, all the strengths and no weaknesses, therefore He could relate to anybody and anybody could relate to Him, but that's not true about thou and me. So when we're talking about discipleship we should not individualize it but rather bring it into the community. I'm inventing a new word—*communitize* it. We need to communitize it, taking discipleship out of the individual setting and bring it into the whole.

If one person is discipled only by one, then the disciple will not necessarily be like Christ, balanced, because the person discipling him or her is not balanced in every way like Jesus. One of the things I noticed about those men in the earlier years, which I've had to also apologize for, is that they picked up many of my strengths but also many of my weaknesses. They were gung-ho about teaching people the doctrine of salvation and making sure everybody was saved, that's a good thing, but along the way they picked up some of my weaknesses. Because I'm just one person and I'm imbalanced.

I'm sorry to tell you that you have an imperfect and unbalanced pastor. I'm unstable. But the good news is that I'm preaching to a church that is unstable and full of imbalanced and imperfect people. But when you get us together, the gifting of Christ that's in you and in her and in this other brother and sister comes together and what happens? The new disciple begins to see more of Jesus than he would ever see in just one person. It takes more than one person to really pour into the life of someone who is being discipled. It takes a community. That's what's missing when we just reserve our gatherings to a large gathering on Sunday morning or evening or a Wednesday.

D. Life on Mission.

Not only must we have life by the Gospel, life on life, and life in community, we must have life on mission. What do I mean by that? I mean living life with other believers with the overriding purpose of glorifying Jesus Christ. How do we do that? By making disciples that disciple. Everything we do should advance this purpose. One of the things I'm excited to tell you that we haven't taught a lot on but we will shortly, maybe even next Sunday, is that we've individualized the mission way too much. That's one of the five things that has derailed the American modern church. We have made witnessing an individual task.

Listen to how we talk: *We're all personal witnesses of Jesus.* Yes, we are. Everyone is a witness of Jesus. But what if, as you read your New Testament with fresh eyes, you discover that God never designed evangelism or missions to be an individual effort but a group, community, or church effort? What could that do to evangelism here?

Half of us are scared to death because we're afraid of rejection so we never share our faith with anybody. That doesn't mean you're not a Christian, you're just a "scaredy-cat" Christian. Another part of us may share our faith thinking it all depends on us, that we must learn how to do it correctly and get sinners across the finish line. Another part of us has made it theologically impossible to share our faith. We've got every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed and we try to make everyone a theologian before we can share Jesus with them.

What if, God didn't design evangelism to be anything like that but He designed it that work together, arm-in-arm reaching the lost? What if, instead of me trying to reach my neighbor by myself, I introduce my neighbor to other believers and together we love them and bring them into the community of love and show them how we love them together? To me that sounds more biblical than the prevailing methods used today.

I need to bring this message to a close. I do it with joy because I've been waiting to share this with you. We want to implement these four requirements for true discipleship but to do so I need to tell you a story. It's nothing out of the ordinary but it's what's been happening to Karen and I over the last couple of years. We've been heavily investing in two young couples in this church, that's no secret. We've poured into Bobby and Whitt and their wives. I trained them theologically, as is necessary, but we knew, having made so many mistakes in the past, there had to be more to this than just theological training, so here's what we did.

This past May we started one of these small groups, missional communities, where we try to have at least one meeting a week but really we've stressed we ought to have at least three touches a week. One touch is a regularly scheduled meeting, another in conversation or connection with someone in the group during the week, and another touch is a meal or conversation with an unbeliever. We haven't always been able to do that last one but we're working on it. We're learning. I formed this group with these brothers and their wives in order to learn how to do this because I've never done this before.

But my story doesn't start in May. My story starts a couple of years before I came to Oak Grove. While in prayer one day, the Lord opened up before me an understanding of how the church is supposed to function. I wasn't pastoring at the time, only doing some itinerant preaching from church to church. I began to see, having read nothing about it, how small groups were necessary to the life of a thriving New Testament church. When I came here it was one of my first goals to implement them but in the middle of the implementation the Lord said it was not the right time.

Over the years, I've tried to start but every time it was never the right time. Until the last two years. In May, we began. Since May we have learned these two families in a way that has been so much help to me. I can only speak for myself but my time with these other believers has opened up a realm of Christianity that I knew theoretically but I didn't know experientially. The teacher has become the pupil, many times. I cannot tell you how helpful it's been over the last several months because I've been really fighting discouragement a lot. How wonderful it has been to meet with these brothers and have them say, "Okay, what's going on with you?" and have to take the mask off and share, "Alright, here I am..."

I remember a few months ago as I was sharing with them and they both broke down weeping. I thought I had a salvage crisis moment. I had shared what I was struggling with; it wasn't anything sinful, just a struggle with trying to understand what God was doing in my life. I needed someone to pray with me and give me counsel. Praying with those brothers that day was the answer I needed because as soon as we were done praying I knew what I was supposed to do. I really knew.

Many of you have probably thought I was playing favorites, I know that thought was circulating, but it wasn't that. I knew that somehow before we introduced these small groups to the church I needed to know from experience what I was going to do with you. It didn't need to be just theory. So we've had this prototype group where we've made all kinds of mistakes and there are more to be made. That's what we've been doing for however many months now and I can say for myself, I will not speak for them, I am better for it.

With that in mind, I'm also sad because at the end of this year our group is going to disassemble so we can form new groups. It's bitter sweet. I'm going to miss my time with these dear saints but I'm looking forward to new relationships. In the middle of January we're going to start three new groups, Bobby will lead one, Whitt will lead one, and I'll start one. This is for any of you who want to be a part of it. This is not mandatory, there's no way it could be because it wouldn't work that way. But we want to open up our homes to you and become a smaller missional community. We are greatly excited about the possibilities because the things we talked about today and last week cannot happen in a worship service. Soon we'll have a sign up sheet that will stay open for about 30 days and if you want to be a part of it great, if not, no one will ever hassle you about it.

There is a problem logistically. The problem is that I know, we all do, that you're already so busy now that if we add another "function" it won't work. That led to the dilemma of when do we do this and how do we do it? We cannot and will not disband Wednesday nights in or-

der to meet in small group or homes. Why not Wednesday night? Because that's when we get together and pray, and if anything, prayer is keeping this church going. Sometimes it's better than other times but prayer keeps this church going. I can't remove Sunday morning off your plate because it's the time the most people are here. Therefore we have chosen that on Sunday nights, starting January 10th, we will not be meeting here on Sunday nights but on Sunday afternoons or evenings you will be meeting with your missional community. Each group will have the privilege of establishing their times. This way we're not adding anything to your plate, we're accommodating small group life, real body life, or at least facilitating it because you cannot make it happen and if you do it's artificial.

This is what we're proposing today. I pray it's welcomed and that you pray about it. If you have questions about it we'll be glad to help but, like we said, we're just learning as we go along ourselves. I have to finish by asking you this: when and where do we start taking the Gospel out of the cerebral cortex and start putting it into everyday life and reaching other people? One of the things we want to do in this small group is teach you how to disciple other people. It became apparent to me when I was teaching on discipleship a few years ago that even though I can teach it from the pulpit you don't get it until you see it. That's what we want to do. We want to offer you an environment where you see it in real time, facilitated by the power of the Holy Spirit. You'll see the good, the bad, and the ugly but you'll know it's real.

I conclude by appealing not to Christians at this moment, but to my friends who are yet to be God's children. What God offers you this morning is a family. I don't think there are any strangers here today. In this group that's here, everyone should know we all care for you. Even if you've only visited a few times I think you get that sense, there's an atmosphere here that says you are accepted and approved. But God has much more in store for you.

We failed to learn real community or body life, as I like to call it, is because we grew up in a church culture that did not know this kind of life. For several generations we have seen passed down this artificial attempt to have true Christian community. Therefore, we've been bumbling around here trying to figure out what the Bible says about living with one another, not in a commune, but in a community of faith. That's what God is offering you—community that will love and receive you without you ever changing one degree.

One of the things these small groups are going to be taught is to how get non-believers to the small groups. Don't invite them here to this building, they're not going to come here, most likely. Get them in a smaller group, get them to know some other believers. Invite them to join some of your small group members outside of the regular meeting and do something fun with them. Let them know these brothers and sisters and they'll see the love you have for each other and it will bring them in if God is working in their heart.

That's the kind of love and acceptance we ought to have not just within the small group but in the entire church and that's what Jesus is offering you. He's not just offering you Himself and forgiveness of sins, He's offering you His body, His family, His church. You will come into a group of

people who will love you through every mistake. We will make mistakes in doing that, we already have and we will again, but at least our hearts will be in the right place. You will make mistakes and so will we. Our mistakes will cause us to go right back to the Gospel.

My invitation is simply this: join us in this Gospel experiment of learning the love of God. Don't make promises you can't keep. I've broken every one I've ever made to God. We don't want promises this morning. There's only one promise keeper and His name is Jesus. If you come to Him, truly humble, knowing you can't save yourself but that He can, He will. That's the only thing He will respond to—you believing that He can. *What if my faith isn't enough? I think He can, but what if I still have doubts?* I spoke on that Wednesday night. Assurance has nothing to do with it, just trust Jesus. Give Him your life and see what He will do. If you're going into the relationship trusting Him to do what He's promised you will be saved. There is great hope here. Amen.