

The Nature of a Missional Community

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

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Romans 12:3-8

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. 6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

No discussion of the church is adequate without discussion of this text. The discussion could continue past verse eight but we need to limit it for our brief time together this morning. What is the church? Paul begins by saying the church is the design of God to function for His purpose. He uses the human body as his illustration. He says that God has given this body many members but every member is to function according to its purpose in the overall body. In other words, I don't have a purpose distinct from you. Without you I am nothing. That is true of each and every one of us. Biologically, isn't that true? Each body part has a distinctive function and works according to the wellbeing of the whole. However, that body part, separated and alone, cannot thrive. It will not survive. It can't survive apart from the body.

As God's people you have been saved and you have been placed within a body called a local church. The local church is a microcosm, a small picture of the great universal church comprised of the saints of all the ages and the saints here and now. There are some who do not believe in a universal or general church, they say that's an impossibility because Scripture, when it refers to a church, does mostly in reference to local churches. Therefore a universal church, the entire body of Christ, is not mentioned. That is wrong on two points.

One, it is Scripturally wrong. While it is true that most references to church are in regards to the local church, the church at Rome, the church at Corinth, the church at Ephesus, etc., there are references to this universal body of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it's wrong theologically. Those who reject a universal church argue that this universal church cannot assemble in one place at one time, that a church is a church only because it can

come together at one place at one time. I say that's theologically inaccurate because it defines church by its gathering and thus is a wrong definition of church.

The church is not a worship service. It is not a gathering of a few saints in a building where one or a few exercise their gifts while the rest spectate. This is not the definition of church as we see in the New Testament. Therefore, if you define church as something that can only be gathered in a locality because only in a locality can these people meet, then you've missed the entire purpose of the church. The church is not only the church gathered, it's the church scattered.

This is one of the distinctives Paul shows us in this text. Each body part has been gifted with purpose and functionality according to the gifts given it and those gifts are not to be exercised in this body only when we're gathered but they're to be exercised when we're scattered. These gifts can be used not just for the edification of the body but for evangelism. I am so excited to get to talk about this in an upcoming message. Even if you haven't been given the gift of evangelism, your gift is not just for our edification as Christians but for evangelism.

However, we come as a collection of individuals and our temptation is to think individually, personally, to think of ourselves. That's what we do and that's what we're trained to do. That's what our climate and culture tells us to do. Paul says the church is to be exactly the opposite. The Apostle Paul states that every believer is not to think better of themselves but each one is to think soberly as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. You come together not for your own benefit but for the benefit of the others that you may function according to your God-given purpose for the good of one another, for the good of the whole.

Notice what he says in verse five,

“so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another”
(Romans 12:5)

We're not just members of the body of Jesus but we're members of one another. There is a connection between you and me that is spiritual and divine and mysterious, but nonetheless real. Now we're getting more to the heart of what God intended when He designed the body.

What is this term *missional community*? How is it to be understood as we move forward in being a community that is on mission?

I want to start by telling you what it isn't, because there has become a great deal of confusion in this matter.

I. What a Missional Community Is Not

In the last 20 or 25 years the idea of small groups has become very popular. I remember about 15 years ago when I was at the point where I thought we needed to get small groups going here

I began to do interviews with local pastors and those not so local, I actually did a little bit of traveling talking to pastors and churches who had small group ministries. Since then the information has exploded. There are books galore on small groups and community groups and missional community groups that it seems so many pastors and leaders are having them because it seems like that's what you are supposed to do now. It's become a program thing.

If you ask them why they have small groups they're not necessarily able to answer the question. It has become part of the landscape and because it seems to work, helping the church, churches have small groups. The same is true about any program. Why do we have Sunday School? Most of us would answer it's simply because we've always done it, it's what we're supposed to do. But a missional community is not just about being a small group.

A. It is not About Being a Small Group.

There are certain things that a large group does quite well, but there are some things it just cannot do. For example, the church at Rome. When you think of the church in Rome you think of a large gathering of Christians coming together in one place in a building, but of course, as we said last week, that's not what happened. For one, they didn't have the resources to build buildings and gather in one particular place. Secondly, they were not favored by the people of Rome. In fact, they were being persecuted by the people of Rome, and to come together in one place at one time would have made them sitting targets. While there were times they tried to get as many together as they possibly could, they couldn't do it all the time or even most of the time.

There are benefits from coming together in large settings and letting a man who is gifted to preach and teach share the Word of God, but that's not the totality of body life. That is not all there is to the life of Christ. What happened in the New Testament is what we need to see more of today. These churches, the church of Rome for example, actually consisted of smaller house churches where people could gather in smaller groups. It's in the smaller setting where the life of Jesus could fully take place; it could not happen in the larger setting such as ours.

Having said that, the idea is not getting together and being small and if that becomes the object, just having small groups, the small groups will die. They will not function according to the way God designed body life to function. As I interviewed many people several years ago, most small group ministries simply devolved into becoming about themselves.

Most small group ministries are about closing the back door of the church. As a church grows in numbers, people come through the front door. But a phenomenon happens. As that church grows in numbers, simultaneously people leave the church through the back door. They stop showing up. They're just gone. As the church grows and becomes larger this phenomenon continues. Pastors and leadership have wrung their hands trying to resolve this issue and small groups appeared to be an answer. That's what they concluded. If they could just get people connected in a smaller group they would feel like they were a part of the church and they would be assimilated. That was the term, *assimilated*, used among church growth experts several years ago and it still is.

Assimilate. It means not just getting people in the doors but getting them connected and a part. So small groups became a craze, a popular thing that would solve the backdoor issue. Therefore the focus of the small group was mainly just Christians, those who attended the local church. This is the thing I've noticed over the years and now many pastors have admitted to it and many church growth experts are saying the same thing: If a small group, or even a church for that matter, is joined with a "What's in it for me" attitude, then death is soon to follow. When a small group is designed mostly and mainly to meet some of the personal need of its members, then it becomes sickly and dies.

Christ did not design His church to be primarily about meeting the needs of the members. That is a radical statement and foreign to some ears. But I want you to hear me: Christ did not design this church to be primarily about our needs, the needs of its members. However, if we follow Christ's design, then the needs of the members will always be met. Why? Because that's how He designed it. It's more blessed to give than to receive.

As you function in the giving of yourself according to the gifts you were given for the overall good and wellbeing of the body, you begin to find out that your needs are met. Why? Because you're connected to one another and the power and gifts of the other is ministering to you and your weaknesses and inadequacies. This is God's intent.

But if a church or small group does not focus beyond its own borders, then it will die. It may continue to exist but it will be dead spiritually. This is not about numbers. Many of you have encouraged me these last few months and I appreciate it. A brother told me on a Sunday night if we have 40 or four it doesn't matter if God's here. That's been an encouragement to me and I'm so thankful for that word that night. I have to remind myself of that because this is not about numbers it's about the life of Jesus Christ actually manifested in our midst. It's about His activity occurring, whether it's here or in a small group somewhere. But if our focus is just on us and getting our needs met and satisfying our desires, then we cannot have the life of Jesus because His life is about more than just us.

The Gospel-community cannot be a holy-huddle. Such defies Christ's design, and therefore it cannot thrive and it will not survive. A true Gospel-community must be in constant contact with its environment, culture, and world. Jesus warned against being like the Pharisees who worked to maintain a separation from its culture.

Let me address this for a moment, and I'm going to do so more in the weeks to come. Yes, we are to be holy. "Come out from among them and be ye separate." Absolutely. We are to be a distinct, holy people. But that doesn't mean you withdraw from the world. How would you be saved if Christians around you had withdrawn and never touched your life with the love of God? That's not what the Apostle Paul means. This is the same apostle who said he was willing to do just about anything it took to reach people. He said, "I become all things to all men that I might win some." That's not withdrawing or reclusiveness.

If we start small groups for the purpose of having groups just because we think that will make us more spiritual than we have already lost. That's not what a missional community is.

B. It is not a Support Group.

Small groups do not exist for the main purpose of people coming together to share their problems. If this is what the group degenerates into, then it is a co-dependent group. It's a therapy group, and that is not the church Jesus died for. At times these meetings will be focused on the need or problem of one or a few of its members, but not week after week. If there is not growth into the full stature of Jesus, then something is wrong.

Again, it is right that the needs of the weak are ministered to by the strong, and in that small group where there is transparency and openness and life-on-life, you can't hide your problems. We get acquainted with you. We know your facial features. We know your demeanor. Those things tell what's happening in your life and those things should be lovingly walked through with you. You ought to have the grace of humility and expose your heart to say, "Yes, I'm hurting, here's how..." but when week after week this happens and there's no growth, something is wrong. These groups cannot be only a support group, although they will support.

C. It is not Primarily a Bible Study.

Yes, you heard me correctly. We are not having these groups in order to just have home Bible studies. If you want to have body life and the life of Jesus the small group gatherings must not be about Bible study. If you let your group become primarily a Bible study, I'm telling you it will die. *How can that be? How can studying the Bible make a group die when it's the life of God?* I'll address that shortly but first let me ask a question.

Did the early church have personal Bibles? The early church did not have personal Bibles, so the idea of Bible study was foreign. Bible study is wonderful and is most necessary. You are to study to show yourself approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed but equipped to rightly divide the Word of Truth. You are to study, but studying the Bible does not replace obedience. When the early church got together they put into practice the instruction of the apostles. They didn't get together and discuss the sermon like we do. When they discussed the sermon they did so as to plan how to do what they heard. Paul tells Timothy,

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Bible study is to translate into action. Paul's emphasis to Timothy is that the Bible is given to promote righteous behavior. In other words, it promotes obedience. Endless Bible studies that only increase knowledge and does not translate into demonstrable action are not only useless, they're rebellious. If you don't do what you hear then you're not a doer of the word but a hearer only

and James says that's rebellion. It's useless to grow in the knowledge of Scripture and not obey it. It's a waste of time to do so. We cannot let these groups become just Bible studies.

Will there be a study of Scripture? Will there be a support of each other? Yes. But this group cannot primarily do either of those.

D. It is not Another Weekly Meeting.

When weekly meetings become the goal a whole host of other problems arise. For example, what do you do with children during a meeting? Children don't always flow with the program, so what are you going to do with them? Now we have to come up with something to do with the children so mom and dad can have their meeting. That's not good. I suggest they ought to be a part of these groups. Of course, younger children can be disruptive and there may be a need to have something for them at the same time as the small group maybe in another room or something but here's my concept and see what you think.

It seems to me that God's wisdom is displayed here in bringing your children into the life of Jesus Christ, that is, the body. All they can see here at this building is me preaching a sermon and folks leading us in worship. They may hear a testimony or two but they don't see the life of Jesus here, they just hear about it. I want them to see it. Where will they see it? They ought to see it at home, absolutely, but they also ought to see that mom and dad know they cannot live the Christian life without other believers so they get together with other believers and it's been made a priority in their life. In that life of sharing one with another on a mission, the children then see the life of Jesus Christ acted out and mentored in such a way that is observable and doable.

There have been discussions over my comments about the nuclear family and the life of the church and I want to ask again: whose family did Jesus die for? What family is going to go into eternity and live forever with the Father? The bride of Christ, the church. That does not mean you are to neglect your nuclear family, your physical family. It doesn't mean that somehow the nuclear family is less important or not to be regarded at all.

However, how do you reconcile when some messengers came to Jesus, who was in a home teaching, and said, "Your mother and brothers want to talk to You," and Jesus said, "Tell them this, 'Here are My mothers and brothers, those who do the will of My Father.'" He didn't get up and go talk to His mothers and brothers. How do you reconcile that? I reconcile it by saying your nuclear family is extremely important to God. He gave them to you as a responsibility, first of all spiritually and second of all physically, so why separate the two and say there is my physical family and here is my spiritual family? Why not amalgamate them and bring them together? Why not bring your local family under the umbrella of the spiritual family of God and rear your children in that atmosphere and environment? They ought not to compete! What are we doing to our children by separating the two? No wonder they don't see the Gospel and don't want much to do with it. We have compartmentalized and said, "This is my family, this is my personal time, and the two shall not mix." No. God gave you children to rear them spiritually under the umbrella of the family of Jesus Christ.

I dare you to think and imagine, what would happen as your children watch the missional community that you would be a part of? What would happen as they see the group's interaction and watching Jesus change your life, making you more and more into a disciple who looks more and more like Jesus? Talk about evangelism for our youth. I know of no better sermon than to see that happen.

This is not about just another weekly meeting. We're not into that. If we try to disciple people in a two-hour meeting it is not missional because disciple making is a way of life all the time. You have to open up the door to life. It's a *life* mission not a two-hour meeting mission.

That's what it isn't. Let me hasten to what it is.

II. The Purpose of a Missional Community

The purpose of a missional community is the same purpose of the local church since the missional community is a microcosm of the local church.

Three things can summarize the purpose of the church as found in Scripture:

A. Consecration—the worship of God, to know God and love Him supremely.

This is the first major purpose of any local church. This is not only the purpose of a local church but also the purpose of every Christian. The missional community is a group of believers who help one another relate to God. That's what a missional community is. That's what I hope you experience in these small groups as your brothers and sisters help you and you help them relate to God and grow in the knowledge and love of Him together.

B. Community—the edification of fellow believers.

The missional community is a group of believers who help one another relate to each other in a way that matures the group. Here's what community means: coming together not to meet for two hours a week, but meeting to help one another relate to each other in such a way that we all grow in the likeness of Christ. This is what we're speaking of.

C. Commission—sent out to make disciples of Jesus.

A missional community is not only a community that helps each other relate to God and each other in such a way that matures each other, but also a group of believers who help one another relate to unbelievers in a way that attracts people to Jesus. This is absolutely important.

I would suggest to you that when you and I have community and we're really helping to relate to each other in a way that strengthens and matures one another and we're helping each other relate to unbelievers outside our community be attracted to Jesus then you are fulfilling the first

purpose, consecration unto God. That's what we're called to do. We're called to worship God, love one another, and evangelize the lost.

III. What a Missional Community Is

A. It is a Community of Gospel-Oriented People.

I will keep sounding this note even to your boredom because we need to understand that the only thing that can motivate and influence us is the Gospel. It's not our ideas, it's not our agendas, it's the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel has the answer to everything that concerns your life and my life and it does. We are to live our lives according to this great Gospel.

B. It is a Community that Operates as a Family.

This is a community of believers that comes together and operates like a family. But listen. What family practices occur here in this hour and in this building? What have we done this morning that looks family like? Very little. Surely we've prayed for one another, we've sang together, those are good things but is that all families do in their homes? I pray you would do more of this in your homes but families don't operate that way and neither should this family. There's no way we can do that in this 10 o'clock hour, so we propose that we come together in smaller groups called missional communities.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus didn't try to disciples 100 apostles at a time? I wonder why. He could have taught a hundred for sure, He taught thousands and thousands when He got up and spoke. Teaching wouldn't have been a problem, but that's not all there is to discipleship. He chose 12 men to get close to Him, to observe Him, and get into His life to learn the way He thought and felt. He wanted and allowed them to see how He handled different circumstances and how He responded to different stimuli so they could see His teaching come to life within Him. How many did He do this with? Twelve.

It's interesting that academia tells us a group of 12 is just the right size to effectively instruct and model. Twelve is the ideal number. Christ already knew that. Jesus didn't need academia to tell Him that, He knew psychology and sociology. He knew the dynamic of the human life—He made it. True family life doesn't occur with 80 or 100 people crammed into a small room at a particular hour; it occurs in your homes. When a group gets much larger than 20 it begins to shut down on the body life. It just cannot happen when it gets larger. Why? Because it becomes more of an event than family life.

The missional community is a family built upon love where each other truly loves one another. It is a family that will love sinners as people who are in the family but don't know it yet. That's the motivation—the love of Jesus Christ—we love one another and we love people who are not in our group who are not followers of Jesus because we see them as a part of our family but they just haven't discovered that for themselves.

What kind of love are we talking about? This is not a casual “I love you”. Listen to Jesus.

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”
(John 13:34-35)*

There are two things we need to notice about the love of Jesus.

Love submits.

Jesus submitted Himself even to His disciples.

*“Love . . . does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;”
(1 Corinthians 13:5)*

Love does not vaunt itself. It doesn't say, “Hey, what about me? Think about me.” No, it thinks about others. Love submits.

“submitting to one another in the fear of God.” (Ephesians 5:21)

You don't have anything over your brother or sister. You see their needs and welfare greater than your own.

“fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” (Philippians 2:2-5)

Love submits.

Love serves.

“just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Galatians 5:13)

Love submits. Love serves. The missional community is a Gospel-oriented family.

C. It is a Community of Missionaries.

He has given us His Holy Spirit to go and make disciples that we might fulfill His will. I want to be clear about the word *missionary*. I do not mean it in the full sense of crossing cultures and taking the Gospel to a people who do not have the Gospel, we reserve that for those whom God calls to that special task. I use the word *missionary* in a lesser way to say we have a mission and we have been sent to fulfill it. What is that mission? To make disciples who make disciples.

Some churches or small groups exist for the distinct purpose of strengthening those in the group who witness. God did not design the body for only a certain few to do evangelism. God intended the *body* to do evangelism and not just particular body parts. A hand or foot cannot function apart from the body. One person does not have all the spiritual gifts. Lone Ranger Christianity is not New Testament Christianity. Jesus never sent the disciples out one by one but by two by two.

Evangelism is not an individual thing, it's a team thing. What I'm looking forward to in the months to come is that you and your group will learn how to do biblical, natural evangelism. It's not about learning a script; it's not about soul winning, or learning some technique or program. It's about learning the life of Jesus Christ in His body and together, naturally, evangelizing. I'm not going to take the time to explain this morning, maybe in the weeks to come, but definitely in the groups that will be covered. That is one of our priorities—teaching that *group* how to minister to the lost as a unit, not just individually.

That ought to bring hope to some of you who are scared to death to open your mouth and share about Jesus. It's not that you don't love Jesus, you love Him much, you just get stage fright. You get so nervous that your mind goes blank, your tongue goes numb, and you don't know what to say or what to do. I want to encourage you that God doesn't necessarily intend for you to go out there and try to fish someone in for Him but to be a part of a group of believers who work together to do that. Your individual gifts will be strategic to your participation in evangelizing.

Therefore, a missional community is a family of believers who disciple people (inside and outside the community) to live life according to the Gospel. That's all these small groups are going to be and I pray they do just that.

I'm going to ask our sister Tina Scott to come right now. I've asked her to share briefly what these last few months in our missional group has meant to her.

Tina Scott: First of all, I'm a Nicodemus at night kind of person. I prefer a one-on-one setting behind the scenes kind of thing, that's me. So for me, small groups have made me more comfortable in an intimate and smaller setting to get to know people more and to open up and let people know me as well. This has been a blessing beyond measure for me because I've been able to grow in the knowledge of the Lord through Scriptures and being around the other believers. We've been able to edify and encourage one another and speak truth into each other's life. That alone has been a blessing for me. It's also been fun. We've gotten to know each other's personalities, we've played pranks, we've had surprises for each other, and we've also done some outreach opportunities with people outside of our group to love and serve them. It's been fun to do all of that together as a group.

Also it's an answer for prayer for me. A couple of years ago I was praying about seeing people in the church and not knowing them as closely as I know others. I was praying that the Lord would help me get to know those I don't know and so this is an answer to prayer because I really look forward to the next group and the groups to come because it's going to give me a chance to get to know the ones I don't know. I'll get to know you and we'll get to do life together and speak truth and grow together so I really look forward to that. And that's about it.

Michael Durham: Thank you, Tina. I wanted you to hear from a different perspective. Did you notice she said they play pranks on one another in the group? Well, that's true and I'm usually the butt of the pranks. One particular night in our house, we had just started and one of the individuals got up and went to the restroom and came back and told Karen and I, "There's a leak in your bathroom." We both immediately ran to the bathroom thinking it was just going to be flooded and there, beside the toilet, was a leek. A vegetable. I know this person. Two years before this, they would never have attempted to do that. In fact, they said, "For two years I've wanted to do that, I just didn't know how you would handle it." But they got through the crust and found out there was a real heart in there that could enjoy practical jokes.

What does that have to do with the kingdom and a family and discipling those within and without to live life according to the Gospel? It's life. That's what it's got to do with it. This is real. It's people being who they really are and loving and forbearing—which is another way to say love and putting up with—and forgiving them. We didn't forgive her for the leek because there was nothing to forgive. It was fun and we all laughed. I laughed the hardest probably. This is learning life together and that includes the bumps, the sharp corners, and the razor edges of each other. And while we dull those negative things we accentuate and sharpen and strengthen the strong and solid parts so that Jesus is more visible. You can't do that by yourself. I can't do that by myself. Again, I have to tell you how blessed I've been these last several months, to have men who know me well enough say, "I see this, let's talk about it."

I pray you'll want to be a part of a missional community. How we're going to do all of the logistics? Don't worry about that right now. There is a sign up sheet in the foyer today, please, if you would like to be a part of one of these small groups that will be meeting on Sunday evening in lieu of our Sunday evening services, then sign up. There is a cut off for signing up because we'll have to take those who have signed up and discern how we're create the different groups. We will let you know which group you'll be in. We want each group to meet before the target beginning date to give you an idea of what it will be like when the groups start meeting on a regular basis.

As we bring this time to a conclusion, I pray that you've been motivated within your heart to say, "You know, I think this is what's been missing in my life. I love the Lord, I love prayer, I love church, but I don't seem to make much progress. I seem like the squirrel running in the little wheel, I feel like I'm spinning and spinning but not making too much progress. I take two steps forward and one back. Sometimes it feels like I take one step forward and two steps back." I suggest to you that God didn't intend for you to run this race by yourself. Come run with us. Sign up, be a part of what God wants to do in you and in others. Amen.