

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

What happens when we get together? One of the important things to realize is that church as a small group is not like anything else you may have experienced as “church.” We get asked, “Is it like a prayer meeting?” We pray, but no, it is not like a prayer meeting. “Is it a Bible study?” No, it is not like a Bible study, although we will usually spend some time over the Word. Perhaps the greatest temptation we have is to make it a mini version of a larger meeting, where someone has been delegated to prepare some worship songs, another has a teaching, etc. If we do that, we have not gained much from meeting in a smaller group. Small group dynamics are totally different from those of a larger group.

Church is family. A normal family, gathered around the dinner table, does not have, for example, the mother say to the children, “Now let’s all listen to what Dad has to say,” and then the father talks for 40 minutes explaining something that is not of much relevance to the kids. No. Normal family is interactive, participatory and intensely relevant to the people there. And church should be the same way.

**The Holy Spirit needs to be the One who controls the agenda in our times together. He has the plan for what needs to be accomplished. If we will learn to hear and follow His promptings, we will never have a boring meeting!**

1 Corinthians 11-14 talks about what we should do when we come together. Chapter 12 spends much time explaining how vital every part of the body is, and how each part has a different function. This needs to be expressed in our times together. I Corinthians 14:26 is the key verse for our meetings. It says that when we come together, each one has a contribution to make. Whether a song, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation—everything must build up and edify the body.

According to Acts 2:42, when the believers came together, they “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship,

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

the breaking of bread and prayers.” These are the four elements we try to include in the times we spend together.

### **The Apostles’ Teaching – Study of the Word**

If our simple churches are going to multiply rapidly, we will no longer have the luxury of taking several years to train a Bible teacher. Often, a new Christian will be leading something after only a short period. Paul faced this too—in some instances he moved on very quickly. For example, in Philippi he only “stayed for several days”(Acts 16:13). Therefore, we need to use an approach that allows the Bible to teach itself, where even the youngest Christian is able to lead.

We evangelical Christians tend to emphasize the importance of good *teaching*. This is missing the point. The essential is that people are genuinely *learning and applying* Scripture to their everyday lives. Statistics show that we learn far more by actively participating than by hearing alone. Scientists tell us that we remember 20% of what we hear, 50% of what we see and hear and 70% of what we hear and see and then say ourselves. In simple church, we have the opportunity to involve everyone. In New Testament times, teaching was far more interactive; for instance, the word used for Paul’s lengthy teaching in Ephesus is the word *dialegomai* from which we get our word “dialogue” (Acts 20:7). Jesus tells us that we are to teach new disciples to obey His commands. In a small group, there can be some kind of accountability built in. More than once, we have had people say to us that they learned more in just months of simple church, than they had in years of sitting listening to good sermons!

We try to spend little, if any, time in teaching in a formal fashion, but rather elect to have interactive discussion of a Bible passage. Over the years, we have come back repeatedly to three different methods of Bible study that are discussed below. The method is not important, but the fact that the method leads

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

to a participatory discussion is important. Each of the three requires a facilitator. Their responsibility is to make sure the study keeps moving, that everyone is taking part and that no one person (particularly the facilitator!) dominates. It is not the facilitator's job to answer questions that come up. Rather he should direct questions back to the group, "What does anyone else think?"

In this type of Bible study, everyone's opinions are valued and there is no such thing as a wrong answer. But what if someone starts teaching heresy? (Christians always seem worried by this possibility!) In dozens of these groups over the years, we have never seen one sidetracked by wrong teaching. The Bible, rather than the leader of the group, becomes the authority. Even with the youngest Christians someone always says, "That doesn't seem right," if anything too outlandish comes up. A good facilitator will require some kind of Scriptural backing for any opinion voiced.

Usually our churches study their way through a book. Sometimes as much as a whole chapter will be covered in a session; more frequently, just a few verses. Because literacy may be a problem in some groups, we usually read only a couple of verses before stopping to discuss what we are learning.

### ***Practical Application:***

Get together a group of friends and try out the different methods of Bible study. I suggest using passages such as;

Acts 2:41-47;  
Acts 13:1-4;  
1 Corinthians 9:19-23;  
1 Corinthians 14:26-33.

(You'll be surprised how much you learn!)

### **Method I**

A couple of verses are read, and then the group answers three questions:

What does it say?

What does it mean?

What difference does it make in my life?

You may wonder if there is any difference between questions one and two. But take the phrase from John 1 where it says, "In the beginning was the Word." There is a huge amount of meaning in there that could get missed if the second question were



## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

not included. We use this method in our churches that meet in retirement homes. It is very simple and easy.

### **Method II**

This is a modified Navigators' method. A couple of verses are read, and we look for things that correspond to three different symbols. The first is a question mark, which obviously symbolizes something a person does not understand. The second symbol is a candlestick and is used to represent something that sheds light, either on another passage of Scripture, or else something that is going on in a person's life. The third symbol is an arrow, and stands for where God is piercing a person's heart – they know that they have heard from God and need to do something about it. So a person might say, "I have a candlestick on this verse. This describes a situation that happened to me at work last week..."

We used this method to start our present group of churches. We pulled together a dozen non-Christian business people and studied the book of Proverbs looking at principles relating to business and wealth. Over the course of the study, every person became a Christian!

### **Method III**

The third method we learned from Robert Fitts.

*In discussion Bible Study we simply read the Scripture, each taking turns reading a few verses, depending on how many people are present. While it is being read, everyone is invited to interrupt at any time and make a comment or ask a question."*

*Alpha Omega Bible College*

If it seems that too much is being read, then the facilitator will stop the person reading and ask, "Does anyone have a comment?" It is unusual for more than a few verses to be read

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

before a discussion develops.

Our churches that meet in the housing projects use this kind of study.

The method used is not important. It is just a tool to accomplish the goal of a participatory Bible study. Here the Bible itself is the teacher, and everyone in the group is involved in both the teaching and learning process and the application of what is learned to daily life.

Are we saying there is no place for traditional teaching? Our experience is that the small meetings in homes are not the best place for extended, lesson-type messages. If God has revealed some helpful or exciting truth, do share it—in a brief form. But the cold fact is that listening to long discourses does not turn people into teachers!

Our occasional larger meetings, where several house churches come together, have two main differences from the smaller meetings: First, the chances of getting to say something are definitely smaller. Over time, everyone can speak, but not in every meeting. Second, the larger numbers often justify inviting in a gifted believer who has a powerful message or anointing.

### **Fellowship**

Studies of early church history show that it was as much the love that Christians had for each other, as the actual message itself, that won so many to their cause. That this love went across culture, religion, ethnic differences and even the slave/free barrier was a great testimony to all.

Just a casual reading of the New Testament forces one to the conclusion that the early disciples shared their lives together in a deep and meaningful way. In this country, and at this period in time, fellowship has tended to be superficial at best, and at

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

times downright absent! How can we change this?

Jesus taught that the world would know we are Christians by our love for one another. The apostle John, described as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” shared deeply on the nature of fellowship in his first letter. “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other...” An old song we used to sing in England went like this:

*Let us open up ourselves to one another,  
Without fear of being hurt or turned away,  
For we need to confess our weaknesses  
To be covered by our brothers' love,  
To be real and learn our true identity.*

True fellowship is like this. It is being real with one another, loving and caring for one another, genuinely and without hypocrisy. It is knowing if someone is having difficulties because we are familiar with them enough to recognize the signs. It is being willing to let down the masks that we all put up (“Yes, I’m fine, thanks,” with a bright smile when inside we are barely under control) and risking letting people know us as we really are. True fellowship takes time and commitment.

John’s conclusion in his letter: It is hard to believe that you love God who you cannot see, if this is not being matched by love for your brothers and sister who you can see.

### **Breaking of bread**

We have been involved in home style meetings now for most of the last 30 years, and we have come to the conclusion that there is one factor more important than any other in determining whether a group will be successful or not. Do they share meals when they get together? Those that eat together invariably do better than those that do not.

Eating obviously played an important part in early church life, as it did in Jesus’ life. Some of Jesus’ most effective times



## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

***Practical Application:***

In our small group, are we always expecting the same person to provide most of the food?

with unbelievers included food, e.g. Zaccheus, Matthew’s friends, etc. Many of the occasions described with His disciples involved a meal, e.g. the Last Supper, and His times with the disciples after His resurrection. Acts 2:46 reveals that the early church shared their meals daily with great joy. 1 Corinthians 11 tells of the problems that arose when some people failed to share the common meal, during which they remembered the Lord’s death in the communion, appropriately.

Eating food together does something to the way that people relate to each other. We have found that it produces an informal atmosphere that makes it much easier for people to share their lives together. However there are some guidelines that we use. As in everything else, we try to make it easy to duplicate. If a host family produces a gourmet meal, that makes it very intimidating for others who think they have to live up to that standard. In general, we have a simple potluck meal together. Everybody brings a contribution. If it is in the evening, we may have those who work just bring something that they can pick up at a store, such as sodas or a dessert. Occasionally there are drawbacks to not organizing it more, such as the time when every single family brought some kind of pasta dish. But in general this approach works very well. We try to make sure that people help with the clean up, and if we know there are families who are struggling to make ends meet, the leftovers provide a sensitive way of helping them out. (We will sometimes produce extra large amounts of food so that we can do that.) Our occasional celebrations, when all of the local home churches come together, include a meal, as do our leadership times. We love our “meetings”!

**Prayers**

Our God is a creative God, and when we learn to follow the Holy Spirit in our times together, it is amazing what happens. Once in Jesus’ presence, He shares His heart with us, and as we listen to Him, He draws us closer to Himself, and leads us in the

## WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

direction that He has planned for us. It is as though we are the instruments of the orchestra, the Holy Spirit is the conductor, and as we each play the melody that He has given us individually, He produces a symphony.

1 Corinthians 14:26 says that when you come together, each person has a contribution to make. An open time together when everyone can bring what is on their heart is one of the most characteristic things about church in the home. Perhaps a typical meeting (is there such a thing?) might include some worship including songs, scriptures, praise, then maybe a prophecy or picture that someone has with some accompanying discussion, ministry to the needs of those there, sharing of what people have been learning through the week, prayer over an area of the city where we are wanting to start a new church—the possibilities are endless.

***Practical Application:***

1). Take times within the group to have different people facilitate/lead the times together.

2). Practice praying conversationally:

- Each one take a turn praying.
- Only pray a sentence or two each, before the next person prays.

Prayer for an individual is precious. Frequently we have them sit in the center and some come and lay hands on them to identify with them. Then we pray around the area of whatever has prompted the prayer. Often people have prophecies or pictures for them or are impressed with a verse of Scripture for them. This kind of prayer can be life changing! For us, the teaching of John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Church movement has been so helpful. He taught us, “You spell faith, ‘R-I-S-K.’” It can be a risk to boldly pray for specific answers for a person, but God wonderfully responds when we step out in faith.

Following the Holy Spirit in our times together is an adventure!