

Development and the Acts 2 Early Church Experience for Grace Baptist / 11.09.08

[Slide 1: map of first small group] Introduction

- † **[Slide 2: Groomsmen picture]** Last month, I watched a movie called *The Groomsmen*. I thought about showing you a clip, but I couldn't find one that didn't have three cuss words in it. I'm not recommending it, but *The Groomsmen* got me to thinking. Any of you see it? Not many. What about television shows, like *Cheers* or *Friends*, how many of you have ever seen an episode of those? Ok.

- † When we watch these shows we see something desirable: a sense of fellowship. The *Cheers* theme song said, "Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name, And they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name."
 - You know, the New Testament repeatedly instructs us to greet each other with a holy kiss? Five times this command is given, did you know that? That ought to provoke some fun in the teen ministry this week. I have remember to warn John. They didn't greet each other with a holy kiss on the show *Cheers*, but does anyone remember what happened when Norm would enter the bar? *Norm!* They would all enthusiastically yell out Norm's name. That's the kind of greeting the Bible is talking about.
 - It would be cool if you would do that for me. I'll start coming to church at the last minute, and when I walk in you can call out, "Will!" Or maybe we should do it for David when he comes up to preach – never mind pastor appreciation month – how loved would he feel if we all shouted out, "Dave!"
 - Now, so I don't get in trouble with our dear pastor, please note that was a joke! Do not come in next week and do this, or I will be in deep trouble. David and I want to point you to praise the name of Christ, not ours. Else, we would have Seth or Jared introduce us like Johnny Carson, "Here's Willie!" So, don't call out our names, but do greet one another with enthusiasm.
 - In contrast, did you ever go into your boss' office and he or she didn't even look up from the desk? That tells you that you do not enjoy Christian fellowship with your boss, right? I have had that happen a couple of times in churches. I go to various churches to preach or just to see what God is doing, and sometimes there are people who pretend to be too busy to greet me. It's like the anti-Christian welcome.

- † **[Slide 3: Groomsmen ABCD]** Anyway, as I watched this movie, I was thinking about our ABCD acronym for biblical community. A is accountability to the biblical standard, B is belonging to each other, C is caring for each other, and D is development, development of ourselves spiritually and thus development of the ministry as a whole.
 - **[Slide 4: Groomsmen BC highlighted]** Two things bothered me as I watched this movie and thought about *Cheers* and *Friends*. First, I think these characters had a better sense of belonging and care than many of us experience in the church. They spent time together multiple times a week, while some of us say we don't have time to meet even once outside of church. They shared their troubles and triumphs while most of us try to stay independent and private. As David asked a couple of weeks ago regarding song lyrics, if the pagan world recognizes the need for intimate friendships, why don't we?
 - **[Slide 5: Groomsmen AD highlighted]** Second, there is a flaw in their kind of community, in the A and D. The world recognizes the need for intimate friendships, but they don't know how to do it God's way. In these shows, they had some accountability, but not to the biblical standard; and they were not helping each other to develop so as to multiply the effectiveness of their group. They might expand their group – if you have good belonging and good care, the group is going to grow – but they were not developing leaders so that the core values of the group could be passed on to more people.

- You ever wonder why the YMCA no longer lives out the C? or why Harvard and Yale, which were founded to train pastors, deny evangelical theology even in their divinity schools? This is why: somewhere along the line, due to a lack of accountability and development, they failed to pass on their values to the next generation.
- † I think David has done a great job over the last five weeks, of explaining the AB&C of biblical community and why we think Life Groups are our best effort at achieving those things. Today, I want to talk about the D, development, and also take a look at the biblical description of the earliest church, to see how they lived.

D = Development

[Slide 6: Development #1] *1. God wants every believer to grow into spiritual maturity and leadership.*

- † The first point I want to make about development is that God desires for each of us to grow into spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership.
- **[Slide 7: Genesis and Romans]** Genesis 1:26 says “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’” and Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”
 - It has always been God’s intention to cause believers to grow to be like Christ, who was the perfect image of God the Father. So as we grow, as we experience this sanctification, we will become more like Christ, more like the person God created us to be. That should excite us!

- † **[Slide 8: Romans 12:1-2]** Romans 12:1-2 says, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
- We see that we all are to experience this transformation, that we are transformed by the Holy Spirit’s grace and the revelation of God, and that this transformation process is partly dependent our choosing to submit and cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit.

[Slide 9: Development #2] *2. God uses other believers to help us grow spiritually*

- † Point #2 is that God uses other believers to help us grow spiritually. Sanctification – or spiritual growth – is a dynamic process, one that defies our attempts to make it cookie-cutter and procedural, but we can show you why true biblical community is necessary for optimal spiritual growth.
- † **[Slide 10: flower]** Think of a flower. I know that doesn’t seem manly, but I am a gardener, and one of my joys in coming to Grace Baptist is that Susan Gerhardt is also a gardener, she lives close by, and she gives me free plants. So, think of a flower, a five purpose flower. The Bible indicates that God wants every believer to blossom with passionate worship of him, dedicated service to each other, and effective outreach to non-believers. The more a believer grows to be like Christ, the more we see this flowering occur. But to grow, we need good, healthy, roots, which is biblical community, being rooted into the body of Christ.
- In Greek, there is a term, ἀλλήλων – say it with me...– this means “one-another.” David mentioned there are over fifty verses in the New Testament that command us to love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, be devoted to one another... and God put those verses there because we need those things from one another. We need them to stay healthy spiritually, and to grow spiritually.
 - It is when we experience the love, acceptance, and encouragement of belonging to one another, the serving acts of caring for one another, accountability to the biblical standard to help us keep our commitment to live up to our convictions, and intentional guidance toward spiritual development, it is only then that we steadily grow spiritually and have a chance at reaching our spiritual potential.

† **[Slide 11: 3 key relationships]** That flower of passionate worship of God, dedicated service to one another, and effective outreach to non-believers is similar to our church's three key relationships: love of God, community with each other, and influence with non-believers. We believe that experiencing the love of God will lead you into desiring community with God's people, and that this experience in turn will lead you into desiring to help non-believers come to Christ.

- **[Slide 12: 3 key activities]** Take those three relationships and break them into two actions each: so for love of God, you attend the weekly worship service and you have daily times of Bible study and prayer; for community with each other, you have participation in a Life Group and serving on a ministry team here at the church; and for influence with non-believers, you are frequently praying for them and learning to live before them as a witness for Christ. If you are a healthy Christian and you practiced these six disciplines you would be fulfilling almost all of what the New Testament teaches is necessary for cooperating with the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in you.

† **[Slide 13: Influence of fellowship]** In the first sermon of this series, David explained that our goal is to create the kind of community described in the Bible, which will lead every believer into deeper spiritual growth. This biblical community, which we are trying to cultivate in our Life Groups, not only is necessary because it provides the intimate relationships we know we need as one of these six steps – the red arrow! – but also because it provides the prayer support, encouragement, and accountability we need to consistently participate in the other five steps.

- **[Slide 14: Hebrews 10:24-25]** Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
- As I preached here a little over a year ago, this passage says we are to meet together to provide two kinds of encouragement to each other: encouragement to do the things necessary to strengthen our faith and encouragement to live out that faith by doing amazing acts of love together.
- As David said so well a few weeks ago, without this kind of support, none of us can reach our potential. This means none of us will grow spiritually up to God's expectations, and so none of us will experience the fullness of the blessings God desires for us. The problem is, it is impossible to consistently deliver this kind of life-changing encouragement to each other at a large-group Sunday worship service.

[Slide 15: Development #3] 3. The Bible defines spiritual leadership and spiritual maturity

† The Bible shows us what spiritual maturity looks like: of course, it is to be like Christ. One thing it does not look like is for us to think we are done growing, because scripture clearly teaches that this is a life-long process. In Philippians 3, Paul said that he had lived up to the Law and then given up everything in life to follow and serve Christ, but that he was not yet fully sanctified in his life. If Paul could say that about himself, then we know we still have some growing to do!

† There are several measures of spiritual maturity in scripture. They are all related to each other, but it is instructive to consider them individually. Today, let's look at a couple, starting with the fruit of the Spirit.

- **[Slide 16: Galatians 5:22-25]** Galatians 5:22-25 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”
- **[Slide 17: Grades]** Look at those nine traits; if you were giving yourself a letter grade, like in school, on how much those nine traits were manifested in your daily life, what grades would you give yourself? Better yet, what grades would your best friend or your spouse give you?

- As we grow to be more like Christ, we will manifest these traits more consistently, to where we are able to honestly and accurately say we deserve an A for each trait. These fruit are a gift of the Spirit to all believers, so the more we walk in God's light, the more we walk in the Spirit, the more we will have these qualities instead of the negative "deeds of the flesh" Paul also described in Galatians 5.
- † **[Slide 18: Christ-likeness]** As we grow spiritually, we will become more like Christ in other ways too. Our moral values will increasingly match up to those of Christ and we will be more obedient to the biblical teachings we know...
- **[Slide 19: Ratio]** Another step toward maturity is when our priorities begin to match Christ's. Think of the number of hours in a week that you watch tv, play video games, surf the internet, and play golf or whatever hobby you have, and compare that number to the number of hours a week you spend helping someone else. For most of us that is a big ratio, many more hours spent on entertainment than on selfless ministry. Of course, we need rest and recreation, so there is nothing wrong with having some hobbies and fun, but Christ lived a life of purpose, and as we grow toward spiritual maturity, so will we.
 - **[Slide 20: Christ-likeness]** Another big step in our spiritual development is when we begin to actively follow Christ, in other words, we actively go out and do the things Christ did and told his disciples to do, like share the gospel with those who do not believe, teach other believers, mentor those younger in the faith, and sacrificially serve each other.
- † Before you start grumbling and coughing at me, let me make clear that I am not trying to make any of us feel bad about ourselves. None of us are perfectly like Christ – we are all still growing! – but I want you to have this vision for what we grow into. I want you to desire this growth that God has promised us. Please understand, I am not talking about a mere change in behavior: this is a change in you! You will become more like Christ, victorious over sin and temptation, more fully equipped for a successful life!
- Personally, I want the fruit of the Spirit to be more evident in my life, don't you want the same for your life? I want to be the person others think of as the epitome of integrity and generosity; wouldn't you like others to see you that way? Are you like me in that you want to have a successful ministry for Christ?
- † **[Slide 21: 1 Corinthians 11:1]** In this church, we have elders, deacons, trustees, Life Group leaders, and ministry team leaders, all of whom must exemplify a high level of spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership, so others can say, "I want to be like that person, because I know he/she is following Christ."
- Peter specifically called on Elders to be this example to others in 1 Peter 5:3. Twice Paul told the Philippians to imitate him as he imitated Christ, and he told the Corinthians this twice also. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, he said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."
 - As this church grows, we will need more people in these high profile spiritual leadership positions – you! – but even before you are ready to fill one of these roles, God will have ways you can increasingly participate in his ministry if you are spiritually healthy and growing.
- † **[Slide 22: Ephesians 4:11-16]** Ephesians 4:11-16 both calls us to ministry, and provides some insight into spiritual maturity in the context of the body: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

- Referring back to my second point, note it is when we work together and minister to each other that the church grows and builds itself up in love. God uses his people to help other people. Cloud and Townsend, Christian counselors who wrote a book called *How People Grow*, call this God's Plan A: God's primary way of ministering to us is through his people, the body of Christ. This might sound strange to you, but we actually acknowledge this when we share the gospel with someone or serve others in the church, so it should not be a surprise to find this is God's primary method of ministering to us in our spiritual healing and growth also.
- Even so, to some of you this does seem new, I understand... but that does not mean it is wrong. When Cloud and Townsend first began counseling, they were distressed to find that what they had learned in church and seminary did not always work, and what worked was not what they had been taught. But when they went back to scripture – praise God! – they found the Bible did contain the answers to life's problems, it was just that nobody had taught them parts of the Bible correctly before.
- When I first was exposed to life groups, my reaction was negative. I adamantly told LeeAnn there was no way I was going to go to one. I only went because a pastor invited me and I felt awkward saying no to a pastor. Then he seduced me by asking me to teach. Within a year, I was not only leading a group of my own, but I was declaring small groups to be the best thing that had ever happened to me in church.

[Slide 23: Development #4] 4. Spiritual Leaders Multiply

- † Last point about development: Spiritual leaders multiply. As people in our life groups become more spiritually mature, some of them rise up to become life group leaders, making possible group multiplication. Here is how it works: an existing leader trains up an apprentice from within the group, passing on all he/she knows to the apprentice and allowing the apprentice to gain some leadership experience. After a year or two, when everyone is ready, we will have two healthy Life Groups instead of one.
- † This concept of multiplication is important. I always try to say the group will multiply instead of divide, not only because it sounds better, but because it more accurately portrays what is happening to the ministry. When one group becomes two, we have twice as much ministry happening.
 - **[Slide 24: Group Multiplication]** Let's pretend we were starting now with ten groups. We have more, but let's use ten as a round number. If we multiplied our groups every two years, then we would soon have twenty groups, in four years we would have forty groups, and in six years we would have eighty groups of healthy and growing people. That's a capacity of eight hundred believers in true biblical community with eighty trained and motivated leaders, just six years from now!
 - This is a compelling vision of how our church can make a bigger local impact for Christ! But only if we are willing to grow spiritually ourselves, become spiritual leaders, and multiply.
- † **[Slide 25: Church Multiplication]** I want to illustrate this for you. As a church, we already have supported many missionaries who have planted churches around the globe. This is a church level multiplication.
 - In the first week of this series, Kevin Campbell talked about how a life group ministered to Wanda and him, and they in turn now they lead a Life Group themselves: that is group level multiplication.
 - **[Slide 26: Individual Multiplication]** Kevin also mentioned that God had brought a man named Jason into his life, who ministered to a specific need. What he didn't tell you is that Jason had been spiritually mentored by a man named Keith. Keith, a couple of years earlier, had been mentored by me. I was mentored by a missionary named Bob McNabb, and he had been mentored by someone through Campus Life at college. And now, Jason is mentoring others some of whom are mentoring yet others. This is individual multiplication. It can occur through individual mentoring, or within the context of a life group, which will usually lead to group level multiplication.
 - Now Bob is back out doing mission work in Puerto Rico, I am a seminary graduate training doing full time volunteer ministry, Keith is in full time ministry at Gifts from God and a founder of Barnabas

House, and Jason is doing evangelism, mentoring, and teaching while getting biblical schooling at Trinity College in New Port Richey. What thrills me is that not only are we multiplying the number of effective ministers for Christ's work, but these men are helping people I could not reach on my own.

- † When we get people into a life group, they usually like it so much that their reaction is to say, “We don't want to multiply.” I understand. I have said the same thing. But I'm not sure we can live by that emotion if we live for Christ and understand what he asks us to do.
 - **[Slide 27: Matthew 28]** In the great commission of Matthew 28, Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”
 - Jesus told his disciples to go and make new disciples who would be prepared to make more disciples who in turn would be prepared to make more disciples. It is a call to multiply, just as in the Old Testament God told his people to multiply and fill the earth with little images of him, today Jesus gives us the same command, but it no longer is only through physical means, it can be a spiritual multiplication: accomplished by sharing the gospel with non-believers and teaching believers, such that they grow up to be like Christ, the image of God, capable of doing the same ministry as we do.
- † The Life Group Ministry here at Grace is not in the habit of forcing groups to multiply, but be aware that if you do group life well – if you have good belonging and care – then you will attract people, and your group will get large enough that you will need to multiply to stay effective, so you better have accountability and development so that you have grown spiritual leaders in your group and can multiply when you are ready.
- † Remember that movie I mentioned, *The Groomsmen*? It's tagline was “There's a difference between getting older and growing up.” Can we spiritualize that? Can we say, “There is a difference between being a mature member of the church and being a spiritually mature leader in the church”? Food for thought...
- † **[Slide 28: seed packet]** You should have a seed packet that the ushers were handing out today. Collectively, those seed packets represent \$118 of my money. I believe enough in what I am telling you that I was willing to invest some money in helping you remember it. Please take these seed packets home and put them in a place where you will see them this week, and be prayerful and thoughtful about your own spiritual development and what it means for your involvement in life groups and our church.

Acts 2 experience

- † Let us turn now to the description of the early church found in Acts 2:41-47.
 - **[Slide 29: Acts 2:41-47]** Read Acts 2:41-47: ⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.
- † **[Slide 30: Acts 2:41 highlighted]** In v.41, we see these early believers entered the local church through faith and baptism. That should sound familiar to us. But let's look at all that the early believers were doing once in the church, as described in vv.42-47.

- † We can begin by thinking in terms of our chart of three key relationships. We saw that chart earlier, but I will explain it again: we believe there are three key relationships, which we think create a flow of love: we connect with God and experience his love, which leads us to connect with each other and experience love from God's people, which leads us to connect with people outside the church to share this love.
- **[Slide 31: worship highlighted]** To further their relationship with God, these believers were doing the following things, all in this passage of scripture: they were devoted to biblical teaching, devoted to prayer, had awe and reverence for God, experienced God's work, had daily worship, and praised God.
 - **[Slide 32: community highlighted]** They did these things together. In their relationships with each other, they were devoted to the fellowship, prayed for each other, were devoted to sharing meals, were together daily and hospitable to each other, shared their possessions, and gave generously to the needy.
 - **[Slide 33: relationship table]** And they were connecting to the non-believers in their neighborhoods, which we see by those people being added to their fellowship day by day.
- † The early church knew it would be silly to meet together if they did not have God as the center purpose and focus. They knew it was vital to have an intimate connection to God, for only then can we experience his sanctifying grace that transforms us into the person he created us to be. So their meetings were more than just social time or hanging with good friends, they were worshipful times.
- † The early church also did not settle for having a Bible study, because they knew it would be silly to meet with God as their center purpose and focus if they did not allow what God was teaching them to transform the way they lived and related to each other. They knew they needed intimate relationships with each other, to experience the "one another" blessings that can only come from Christian fellowship, to receive prayer support, to heal relationally and emotionally, and to participate in the ministry using their spiritual gifts.
- † **[Slide 34: purpose table]** Let's look at these same verses with a different categorization, the five purposes identified by Rick Warren in his *Purpose Driven Life*. Most of the worship, fellowship, and outreach are the same. Their devotion to biblical teaching is highlighted for spiritual growth and we note they served each other by sharing their possessions and giving generously to those in need.
- † Do you see that outreach was a natural outcome of their true biblical community? It says God added these people. I don't think that means we should not be active in outreach efforts, but I do think it tells us that if we can emulate the experience of this early church, then we will be so attractive to outsiders – we will shine God's light so effectively – that it will be inevitable that people will come to Christ and join our fellowship.
- † This early church organized their lives around these five purposes, these three key relationships. I don't see in the book of Acts that they were distracted by the cares of life, too tired after work, too busy with other commitments, or too frazzled trying to get one child to soccer practice and the other to a music lesson.
- As an aside, as someone who has worked a lot in the children's and youth ministries over the past ten years, let me tell you that the best thing you can do for your children is to get your life right with God. When they see your transformation, that is when they know he is real and they want to live in faith too.
 - Don't allow yourself to argue that you are too busy to get together once a week for a Life Group. It is the best investment you can make, so you can obey the one-another commands of scripture, so you can experience them in your life, and so you can heal and grow. Give Life Group a year of weekly attendance, and I guarantee that you will want to hang out together even more often.
- † The early church also seems quite passionate, doesn't it? It takes passion to be so purposeful. You might not feel very passionate right now, but don't let that hold you back. Immerse yourself in God's way of life, learn to live in biblical community and let it be a blessing to you, and as you heal and grow spiritually, God will grow in you a passion for his truth, his way of life, and his people.

- † We also see the early church was sacrificial. If you came to our Life Groups celebration back in September, you must have been impressed with the testimonies you heard from people about their Life Groups. Not only were they taking care of each other in every way within their groups, they also were acting as a group to do amazing acts of love for others, both in the church and outside of it.
- † **[Slide 35: map of first small group]** When the early church was denied access to the Temple and the synagogues, they quickly became a cooperative set of home-based groups under the coordination of the apostles. God used this persecution to establish a system that could be exported throughout the known world: small groups meeting in houses, tied together by the teaching of the apostles, which we now call the New Testament.
- † This is what we are trying to accomplish here at Grace Baptist. We have established the Life Group ministry, committed to investing in every person who is eager to be trained and taught about spiritual maturity and spiritual leadership, and developed an easy to follow ABCD paradigm of accountability to scripture, belonging to each other, caring for each other, and developing spiritually to develop the ministry, all of which is derived from the New Testament teachings, because we believe the blessings described in the New Testament experience are available to us today, if only we will follow God's revelation obediently.
- † God has given us a way of life, of life done together... are you ready to follow that revelation, and be blessed? We are not going to force you into a Life Group, nor are we going to say you are less of a member if you don't join one, but if you are not pursuing a life of true biblical community, then you are not being obedient to God's revealed Word, and you must prayerfully address that sin.

[Slide 36: conclusions] Conclusion

A quick summary:

1. God wants us to grow spiritually, to be more like Christ.
2. That growth is necessary so that the church will be effective in ministry.
3. That growth occurs fully only when we are in true biblical community.
4. True biblical community is modeled for us by the early church of Acts and described to us by NT teachings.
5. True biblical community means doing life together. It starts here on Sunday morning, certainly, but it is extended into Life Groups where we covenant with one another to do all the one another commands. And then it goes beyond Life Group meetings, to where we are truly intimate with each other in life.

[Slide 37: applications] Application

1. Accept these biblical truths;
2. Commit to obeying the scriptural commands about living in biblical community;
3. Try out a life group, and open the door to blessing which you have not ever imagined.