

FROM COUCH TO COMMUNITY

Activating the Potential of Small Groups

A green couch is the central focus of the image. Several small, black and white cow figurines are scattered on the couch and around it. One cow is on the top left of the couch. Another is on the top right. A group of four is on the right side of the couch. A group of five is on the left side of the couch. A group of three is on the bottom left of the couch. A group of two is on the bottom right of the couch. The word "Sample" is written in large, stylized letters across the middle of the image. The word "Sample" is in a light pink color, while the word "Group" is in a dark red color. The word "Sample" is written in a sans-serif font, while the word "Group" is written in a serif font.

Sample

Austin Maxheimer
& Zach Below

Group
Real. Bold. Love.

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Chapter 1

IS THIS IT?

BY AUSTIN

Poetic Wax

Big or defining moments in life only become big or defining based on the effect they have on the life that follows. The actual moments themselves are simply singular events that lay no claim to the reverberations that ripple out and alter the courses of our lives.

If that seems a bit deep for a book on small groups, I apologize. I tend to get reflective and want to wax poetic anytime I think back on days or events or moments that seem so inconsequential while you are living them out; yet, when you look back and see the impact those events have had, you realize they literally changed the direction of your life. Irrevocably so in some cases.

Like sitting through a freshman college orientation or receiving a phone call while doing laundry. Not exactly world changers, right? Pretty mundane and routine even. Add in the fact that these were the two moments when I first met and then 5 years later reconnected with the woman who is now my wife, and they become big and defining moments. Sure, at the time they were exciting, pulse-racing, extremely emotional moments, but I've had plenty of those over the years. It was the *result* of each of those moments and the way they shaped my life that added to their meaning.

About halfway through my seminary experience, I had a moment that I now know has become a big, defining force in the direction of my life and that also happens to be the impetus behind this book.

God on the Golf Course

One weekend in seminary, two of my best friends came for a visit. I had lived life alongside these guys for years. All three of us went through middle school, high school, and college together. We remain good friends to this day. During their stay, we did what we do nowadays when we get together: play golf all day. Afterward, we went to a local pub, ate some food, had a couple drinks, and watched the game. It was a long, typical, good day.

Throughout the course of the day, we did what friends who rarely see each other do—we got caught up on each other's lives. We talked about work, family, and old friends, told funny stories, and reminisced. I also got to talk with them about God, Jesus, the church, and faith. I was, after all, in seminary, so these topics were very much just a part of the natural flow of our conversation. It wasn't preachy or alienating in any way. The conversation was simply borne out of our relationship and sharing what was happening in my life and what I was excited about.

There were a couple moments when it became more than just sharing, and some real dialogue opened up. I even remember one heated yet respectful discussion on gay marriage. I got to listen to their opinions, concerns, and frustrations with what they perceive as the typical Christian stance (as mostly understood through the conservative Christian right-wing political bloc). Then I got an opportunity to respond.

I don't know exactly what my two buddies believe about God, but I feel pretty safe in saying they would not describe themselves as Christ-followers. And I know that each of them hold a certain amount of hostility toward the church and the Bible. However, encouraged by the previous day's conversation and doing my due diligence as an evangelical Christian, I invited them to church on Sunday. I was pretty surprised when they actually showed up.

Wholly Unimpressed



For some reason, Christians often hold to this mystical belief that if we can just get our friends into the church building, they will walk out forever changed. On one hand, that is absolutely ridiculous because it doesn't do justice to the long process of coming to faith that many of us go through. On the other hand, it is a kind of innocent naïveté. We want the people we love to experience what we are experiencing, and a Sunday morning church service is our best association for making that happen.

This is where my mind was on that fateful Sunday. I had been learning all this stuff in seminary that was revolutionizing my life. I was finding meaning and purpose and beauty in the Gospel and wanted to share that with two of my best friends, who had opened a door for me to do so.

When I met them in the parking lot, I immediately began seeing the day through their eyes. People do this all the time when going through an anticipated event they've invited others to join them in. When you are showing someone around your new home, taking friends from out of town out for a night in your city, or hosting guests at your kid's birthday party, your awareness of what other people are experiencing is heightened. You see familiar things in new and different ways.

My family loved that church. But as I saw that day through my friends' eyes, things looked very different indeed:

- They saw a bunch of strangers who probably smiled a bit too much.
- They were herded into a room and asked to sit, stand, sit, and stand.
- They watched some foreign "sacred" rituals.
- They heard songs that were a little cheesy, moderately performed, and in no way connected to them.
- They were talked at by a guy who they had never met and who had no real credibility with them.
- The message itself was not really directed to them but was more for the rest of the people in the room.

Then they shuffled out, largely unchanged and wholly unimpressed.

The Power of 52

It was in that moment that my understanding of church was forever altered. I always knew that church is the people, we are the church, and blah, blah, blah. However, it wasn't until that Sunday that I began to internalize that truth and live it out.

I wanted nothing more than my two friends to share in what I had been given and experience what I was experiencing. I saw that they were unable to connect with that gift and experience at a traditional Sunday morning church service in a building.

That day the truth hit me in a powerful way. My friends experienced Jesus much more during our time together on Saturday than they did on Sunday.



What's more, given their attitude and mindset toward Christianity and the church, even if they committed to attending 52 straight Sunday services (unless God went all Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus on them) there would probably be nary a chink in their armor of unbelief.

However, transfer those same 52 experiences to interactions with people who actively and consistently live out their love for Jesus, and you might have a chance. Fifty-two times they would get to dialogue about faith questions—asking honest questions and receiving real answers. Fifty-two times they would see faith lived out in real and tangible ways. Fifty-two times they would experience countercultural sacrificial love. Fifty-two times they would get the opportunity to catch glimpses of Christ, instead of only seeing Christians. Fifty-two times they would build real relationships with people they could share their life with, instead of merely viewing the same spectacle. Fifty-two times they would witness something contrary to the negative perceptions surrounding Christianity.



I love this. Notice how Austin didn't say that 52 small group meetings were the answer. It is relationally living out faith that makes the difference. We hold strong to the idea that this is what small groups *could* be.

Perception Problem

Let's just face the facts here—the church and Christianity have a major perception problem. A recent Gallup poll found that an all-time low 44 percent of Americans have confidence in the church.¹ People outside the church, who categorize themselves as non-Christians, called Christians hypocritical, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.² Nearly half of young Christians between the ages of 18 and 29 are leaving the church, claiming it is shallow, overprotective, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless.³

Yet given all that data, there is one last number that creates a statistical conundrum: 77 percent of Americans still claim, to some degree, to be followers of Jesus Christ.⁴

These facts cannot coexist; they are illogically juxtaposed. Nearly 80 percent of Americans claim to follow Christ, but only half that number say they trust the church, the active body of Christ.

At the same time, people would not use the above laundry list of negative descriptors

regarding Christians and the church in reference to their friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers who are in fact Christians. If everyone who was not a Christian or was leaving the church really thought the other 80 percent of Americans were shallow, anti-intellectual, overprotective, and insensitive, then we would probably have societal breakdown due to the esteem we hold for those around us.

So we know these very real negative perceptions are directed more toward a caricature of Christians and the church than they are toward the real people in our lives who we know, love, and respect. Nowhere is that caricature upheld more than at a traditional Sunday morning worship service, and at no time does it break down faster than when people start living life alongside each other.



This is so true. I work at a fitness center. Many of the employees there hold hostility toward the church and Christians. They would use many of these same negative adjectives to describe Christians. At the same time, they know that I am a Christian and hold no hostility toward me. In fact, I am officiating the wedding of one of my co-workers who is anti-church but, I guess you could say, pro-Zach. Stereotypes break down in relationships.

Full Circle

And now we've fully circled around to the weekend with my two best friends those many years ago. My friends would not describe me as shallow, overprotective, anti-intellectual, judgmental, and the lot (at least I hope not!). Yet, I'm a Christian. And they know that.

As long as the emphasis remains on the deep bond of shared relationship and not on the negative perception of the Christian caricature, stereotypes break down. When we do normal, familiar activities, the wall that blocks the good news of Jesus Christ is not up. In fact, someone may even be able to truly experience Jesus. Or at least a few bricks might go missing from the normal wall that blocks the message, and some of it can leak through.

That was my first awakening of the weekend—I saw how smaller gatherings of Christ-centered communities could break through the negative perceptions people hold against Christians and the church. Dialogue and natural conversation could stand in place of speeches and being talked at. These smaller groups could easily meet people where they're at. Like the golf course. The ultimate goal being that we should create safe environments for people far from God to explore matters of faith that are both intellectually satisfying and experientially credible. But this was only the first step.



Is That It?

A second and much deeper discontent that weekend began to stir in me. I could almost hear my friends say at the conclusion of the service, "That's it!!!?"

"This is what you are dedicating your life to? That's what all the hubbub is about? That's what you couldn't wait to get me to? That's the so-called God of the universe's plan for the world? That's the big reveal of the church?"

My two highly intelligent friends, giving them their due credit, could probably intuit that whatever was going on inside me was much deeper and more meaningful than what they had just experienced. And because of our relationship, they might even allow a shred of credence for it in my life. But why in the name of all that is holy would they care about it? If people just gather for an hour, hear some announcements, listen to some insider language, and poorly sing a few songs—why should they care? Why would they get involved? I'm sure they would much rather be a part of the "Watch Football and Golf When Football Is Not In Season Sunday Morning Club." By the way, if anyone starts that club, please let me know.

That is when my holy discontent became clearly defined: I wanted to devote my life to connecting people to the church and the church to the community. It is my conviction that without Christians gathering as the body of Christ to be present in our communities and affect real life change, the American church will slowly be sucked dry of its vitality and will eventually shrivel up to be a shell of the image we see in Scripture.

Lampstands

The biblical image of the church is that it is the hope of the world. There is this beautiful picture of the church in the opening scene of Revelation. The church is represented as lampstands throughout the world, and Jesus is walking among them in the fullness of his majesty, keeping them lit through the brilliance of his glory—giving life as he goes. Here are some biblical examples of the church being associated with light:

- Jesus, while teaching his followers how they should act in the world and be perceived by the world, calls them the light of the world—not to be hidden away, but to shine so brightly that men have to glorify God (Matthew 5:14-16).
- Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, calls them children of light and says the fruit of light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth (Ephesians 5:8-9).
- In 1 John, the people of God (the church) are called the light of God, and where there is light, there can be no darkness.

Can we say those things about our churches? That in the communities where our churches are there is no darkness? That when people look at our churches they see Jesus Christ in all his splendor and majesty? That the fruit of our churches is goodness, righteousness, and truth? That because of the actions of our churches, people have no choice but to give God all the glory?

If we could answer in the affirmative to all these questions, I wouldn't have to worry about my two friends catching a glimpse of the beauty, meaning, and purpose that was transforming my life; it would simply radiate out from the brightness of the church's light. They would see and feel its impact.

And that is where small groups come into play. Even if you have one big, bright light shining in your city or community, there are still dark spots and shadows cast throughout it. But as small groups, which are really just mini-churches, grab hold of the mission of connecting the church to the community, lights begin to pop up that remove darkness even from the smallest nooks and crannies—places where the larger church body just cannot reach.

Small groups have the distinct advantage of being decentralized, inherently relational, and able to mobilize. With the emphasis on small groups over the past 30 years or so, the church is primed to usher in a fresh explosion of compassion through these groups. There are thousands upon thousands of mini-churches/mission teams poised to unleash the good news through word and action in our neighborhoods, communities, and cities. It is time for a big shift in the function and purpose of our small groups.

Sample

sample

Part One:

THE CULTURAL COWS OF SMALL GROUPS





THIS IS A SAMPLE

The number of pages is limited.

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