

8. Developing Structure to Transform Lives

In our last topic, we talked about three attitude changes that are needed to transform lives. We saw that the first attitude that often needs to change is changing our focus from the problems of people to the potential Christ has given them as He transforms their lives. We see that the second attitude that often needs to be changed is the need to measure success by transformed lives, not by numbers. The third attitude that often needs change is the need to see that our goal is to equip others for the ministry Christ has called them to, not worldly success for self. When these three attitudes are transformed in our lives, the Lord is able to use our lives to make a great eternal impact. We will see that it will also have a dramatic impact on church structure.

We have seen that, from the day the church began, in Acts 2, the new believers immediately began to meet in small groups. Acts 2:42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” In Acts 2:41-47, we saw that those small groups focused on at least eight things. Those can be summarized by saying that those small groups were FLOCKS that were praying and praising. FLOCKS stands for:

F - fellowship
L - leadership development
O - outreach
C - caring
K - knowledge
S - service

In the next eight topics, we will focus on what you do, as a leader of a small group, to transform lives as you focus on these eight things. Today, we will talk about what you do to help each one in your small group develop fellowship with God and with one another. New Christians will only develop fellowship with God as they learn to share their lives with God. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, they hid themselves from God. When God called him, Adam answered, in Genesis 3:10, “So he said, ‘I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.’” Adam was separated from God. This verse says that he had fear, guilt, and shame within. Verse 12 shows that he tried to blame God for giving him the woman and blamed the woman for giving him the fruit. As a result, every non-Christian is motivated by separation, fear, guilt, shame, and blame.

To help a new Christian transform his or her thinking and life, you will need to help him reverse the effects of original sin. Romans 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” The mind will be renewed as a new Christian learns to think Biblically, instead of thinking like the world. That is why structuring for small group Bible studies is so important. First, each person is learning how to understand and apply the Word of God to daily situations in life. Second, each person is able to discuss his or her questions with a small group of others who are also in the process of having their minds transformed. A person who is getting his questions answered from the Bible is learning to think Biblically.

This also determines the type of Bible study that is needed. Remember that a Bible study is not

designed to show the group your Bible knowledge. The purpose of a small group Bible study is to transform the thinking and lives of those in the Bible study. Acts 17:11-12 describes the kind of Bible study needed in both an evangelistic Bible study as well as in a small group Bible study designed to transform the lives of those who have become Christians. Those verses say, “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.” We see that the Bereans:

- were fair-minded – they came with a learner’s attitude
- received the Word with all readiness of mind – they studied and discussed the Word with eagerness
- searched the Scriptures – they kept on discussing their questions and studying to see what the Word of God taught about their questions
- searched the Scriptures daily – they were building relationships with one another as they searched together
- wanted to find out if these things were so – they wanted to back up what they were learning from the Word of God

The results:

- many believed – their lives and thinking were being transformed
- belief transformed both Jews and Greeks – this kind of Bible study is effective in any culture
- belief transformed both women and men – this kind of Bible study is effective with any group (men, women, young people, children)

Total separation from God has already begun to be reversed in the life of a new Christian. The new Christian has now entered into a new relationship with God, because John 1:12 promises, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” You want to help the new Christian begin to understand the fact that he has been placed, by the Holy Spirit, into the family of God and now has both a physical family and a spiritual family. Romans 8:16 describes Christians as a family. That verse says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” One of the things you want to do regularly, both in Bible studies and in personal contacts with new Christians, is to remind them of this change in relationship with God - from being separated from God to becoming children of God. Remind them that this relationship will now never change. Once we are in the family of Christ, we are in that family for eternity

However, fellowship is sharing our lives with God, and with other Christians, so that will depend on whether we are sharing our life or isolating ourselves from God and other Christians. John told his spiritual children how he was helping them build their fellowship with God and with other Christians. 1 John 1:3-4 says, “That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” John said he wrote this book to help his spiritual children learn what he had seen and heard as he walked with Christ, on the earth, for more than three years.

As a result, the book of 1 John is an ideal book to study with a small group of new Christians to help them grow in their understanding of how to have fellowship with God and with other Christians. This is very effective both with one individual and with a small group that meets together. I encourage new Christians to read the entire book of 1 John (if a person has a difficult time reading, encourage them to listen to it being read) every day for a month. Then, each time we get together, we discuss the questions they have from their reading. John says that the goal of sharing these things, with his spiritual children, was to help them learn how to have a full joy. In just the first chapter, we see two things that help new Christians begin to experience a full joy. First, they will learn to have full joy as they learn to walk in the light. Second, they will experience full joy as they learn to confess their sins daily so that nothing is hindering their fellowship with Christ.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy also wrote a letter to part of their spiritual family, just a few months after they became Christians, to help them in their spiritual growth. That book is the book of 1 Thessalonians. That book was written to answer the questions of people who had only been Christians for a few months. The book of 1 Thessalonians contains the answers to many other questions new Christians ask. As a result, I encourage new Christians to read the entire book of 1 Thessalonians every day during the second month after they become Christians. Then, every time we get together during that month, we discuss the questions from their reading of 1 Thessalonians.

Since 1 Peter 2:2 says, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,” this tells us that Peter wrote this book to new Christians to help them get their questions answered. Peter answers some more of the common questions of new Christians. Acts 2:42 says the new believers continued daily in the apostles’ doctrine (the New Testament). This makes a third book, written to new Christians, that includes the apostles’ doctrine. In three months, a new Christian will have read each of those books daily for a month (30 times). Then, they get their questions answered by meeting together regularly with an individual Christian or a small group of Christians. That Christian, or small group of Christians, will learn how to build their relationship with God and with each other as their questions are answered. This will happen because they are sharing their lives together and discussing their questions with a spiritual parent who is concerned to help them grow. As new Christians, they are finding their answers in the Word of God (apostles’ doctrine).

Many churches do not design their structure to help new Christians grow. As a result, many are Christians for a long time before they begin to grow. Since Christ commissioned us to “Make Disciples”, we want to develop a structure that will make that happen. Small groups provide such a structure. May the Lord richly bless you as you structure your church to help new Christians grow and begin their progress toward becoming reproducing Christians who impact the world around them.