

## **THE POWER OF THE HOME GROUP**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

We break away from the Corinthian letter for some special emphasis. I feel this morning my purpose is simply to share with you a pastoral message. Part of my responsibility as pastor is the general oversight under the Lord of the welfare of this church. It includes from time to time the admonition to exhort you, to warn you, to encourage you. To correct you. I believe with all of my heart that the Lord has some specific purposes for the church and I want to speak about one of them this morning.

I'm going to use a text not as an expository text this morning, but simply a text to read and jump off from. Acts 2:42 "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

I believe with all of my heart that this church ought to be a church where two things are happening. Where the truth of God is being proclaimed and the love of God is being experienced. I do not simply want to be a part of the body where only the truth of God is proclaimed because that kind of a body can be very correct doctrinally, but can be very cold and uncaring toward people. I do not on the other hand want to be part of a church body where there is simply an experience in love and no concern for proclaiming the truth. For while everyone may be having a good time, enjoying one another's presence, without a concern for truth there is the meandering away from the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ultimately one falls into the heresy of simply getting together for getting together. Which is never sufficient.

We are seeking to see a church family brought into existence where the truth of God is proclaimed and the love of God is experienced. My whole motivation and goal before the Lord and before you, is to work with all diligence to see this come to pass.

As leadership of the church we have felt particularly concerned and convinced that part of this two fold effort progressing is that we enter in to a kind of new dimension that at this moment of our church's existence the development of home groups. I want you to realize as a church body that we have felt led of the Lord to do this. That we have felt this was God's direction in leadership in the church. When you consider whether or not you're going to be involved that you would do more than consider the question, Should I or should I not be involved? But if you would go one step beyond that and say, If the Lord has revealed to the leadership of the church that the church is to go in that direction should I therefore as a member of that body experience God's complimentary will for me in reference to what God has revealed to the leadership.

I want to kind of lay that out on the table before you that it is insufficient, if the leadership of the church is simply going one direction and the body of the church then goes another. That somehow we can only see this concern come to pass and these goals come to pass if all of us together say, If God is leading Pastor, if God is leading church leadership, then how do I respond and fit into that and make my decision?

I deeply believe if we want to be a New Testament people and be a New Testament church then the same kind of commitments that were present in the New Testament church would be a part of ours as well.

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Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves. That is a key word – devoted. It means to steadfastly continue. It means to keep going. It means to persevere. It means to stay at the effort. What were they staying in? What were they persevering in? Teaching and fellowship. Truth and love. Teaching and fellowship. Breaking of bread and prayer. Again love and truth.

Just for a few moments I want you to consider with me the power of a home meeting. I want to put before you five things as a power that comes when we meet together in homes as Christians. Realizing that the early church did it. And realizing that the Lord wants that to be a part of our experience as well.

What is the power of a home meeting?

1. The power of the home meeting is the presence of Jesus.

Jesus has said in Matthew 18:20 “Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of you.” As you well know Jesus did not intend this to be used as a disclaimer by preachers when only a small crowd turns up, when a larger one was expected. Sort of half apologetically. “The Lord’s presence could have been here tonight in a stronger fashion if more people would have shown up. But since there are few of us, part of him came anyway.”

I remember speaking with a speaker outside of this body that wanted to explore the possibility of coming and ministering in this church. I was asked, How many does your auditorium seat? And I gave them a number and their response was, “That’s too small for my ministry.”

I realize that there are persons in the body of Christ whom he has called to a more extensive kind of ministry. But it seems to me that the Spirit that says spiritual power is in the size of the group is somehow not in keeping with what Jesus said about real raw spiritual power. Where two or three agree, there am I in the midst. I think one of the facets I’m focusing on in regard to the home groups is not just simply who’s going to be there but the fact that Jesus has committed himself to be there whenever we gather in his name.

When you go today and if you look at the sign up list for home groups and you may with me have the temptation to see who’s all signed up in the group. There is one name that is not on any list but is going to be in every home. That’s the name of Jesus. He is committed.

On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1978 Dr. Orr was with us in Sunday services. It was superbowl Sunday in the afternoon. I had been looking forward to seeing the Superbowl. I think it came on about two o’clock. About a quarter to two, Dr. Orr who had been our guest for dinner that afternoon said to us, “We’re going to excuse ourselves we have a visit to make.” I thought, Wow! The superbowl and won’t even have to worry about talking with Dr. Orr and watching the Superbowl. Of course I would have given up one for the other.

But then Dr. Orr said to us as he was going out the door, “My wife and I are going to see Corrie ten Boom. Would you like to go along?” I don’t know why the Lord couldn’t do that on another Sunday other than superbowl Sunday but that’s the Sunday that it happened to be on. It didn’t take me a long time to make up my mind. I reprioritized my time real quickly. I said, I can see superbowl any year but I can only see Corrie ten Boom once. We went and had a delightful afternoon in her presence, talking with her, having her pray for us. Shortly after that of course she had her stroke and has been pretty much unable to communicate since then from what I

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understand. It was just a matter of getting our priorities straight. I had the opportunity to meet Corrie ten Boom!

I'd like for you to feel the same way about home meetings when we say the presence of Jesus is going to be there. That he really will be there.

You say, "But Jesus is with me when I'm alone." Yes he is. I don't disagree with that at all. But uniquely Jesus says that wherever two or three are gathered together, I'm in the midst. Not just when you're alone but wherever two or three are gathered together I'm in the midst. Why does he say, I especially come to you when you are with other Christians?

I think it's because we only know certain things of the Lord Jesus Christ as we find them in relationship with other believers whom he has called. Since each of us reflect the person of Jesus Christ I come to know Jesus Christ through his people. And he is uniquely present when I am gathered together in fellowship with others.

The presence of Jesus. The fact that Jesus will be in each meeting where we gather together does something to my expectancy. I believe the Lord is going to be there. If I do not believe the Lord is going to be there and if we meet in small group fellowship with little or no expectancy then nothing will happen at all. But Jesus has committed himself to be present and we're to expect his presence and to expect him to work. I'm not saying that on the first night you'll experience a lightning flash kind of a presence although that may happen. But little by little as we gather in the name of Christ and get over some of the awkwardness that always comes in the first meeting where we don't quite know one another and are testing the waters, little by little where we gather in the name of Jesus, his Spirit is at work remolding, remaking and refashioning our personalities. The presence of Jesus. That's one power of the home group. A way that you'll experience the presence of Jesus Christ the way you'll never experience him any other way.

A second power of the home group is the experience of belonging. Paul, a word is used by him in Acts 9:26 that when he came to Jerusalem (he'd only been a Christian a short time) he tried to join the disciples. What a good attitude to have. Not, Now that I'm a Christian I'll go off and do my own thing. But he tried. He made the attempt, he saw that body fellowship was important.

That's really critical in our southern California world. As you know that some years ago I came to the perception that Psalm 1 was probably not the best model for southern California. "Blessed is the man or the person who is planted by the rivers of living water, he'll be like a tree that grows up and bears fruit in its season." I began to see that nobody was planted on this soil hardly long enough to grow that big. My idea of the Midwest of the tree spreading out its leafy branches just somehow didn't go with the transitory nature of our community.

Some of you are doing that. Some of you are staying. But most of you are not long-term commitments to this area. You're saving up enough money to hit the Oregon Trail the Washington Trail the Nevada trail, I don't know what trail. Most of you do not have time to stay in this body long enough to be a big oak tree.

But you can be a vine in contrast to being a tumbleweed. A tumbleweed is without life. It's unconnected. It just blows wherever the wind goes. But a vine stays and grows and it can be transferred.

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The experience of belonging. I need to belong. I need to belong to you and you need to belong to me.

We need to have an extended family relationship to one another.

See if you agree with this statement: ten people truly learning to love one another and experiencing together an ever deepening commitment to Christ will have far more influence on the world than a church of 1000 uncommitted members for whom belonging makes little difference in their lives.

I believe that. When Jesus called disciples, and remember Jesus pioneered the original small group. When he called Matthew he called him as the fifth disciple to join four people who had already begun to follow him. These were people who were in temperament a lot unlike Matthew. But when we are called to worship with others we are not at liberty to choose who it is. For the Lord has already done the choosing for us. We simply gather together and find that in our diversity we discover strengths in the Lord. And we begin to belong. We're not just a collection of strangers.

I have a great fear. And that is that this congregation would simply become a congregation of strangers. Freight trains rustling by one another in the dead of night headed for different directions, never touching, never crossing, never speaking, showing up on Sunday morning, singing together, worshipping together. But they going and never having a vital interconnection that is the New Testament ideal of the body of Christ.

Belonging. I need to belong and you need to belong. That's the power of the home group. A sense of belonging.

There is I think a third thing of the power of the home group. That's the joy of acceptance. Realizing that if we can be loved and accepted by other people for what we are and have room to grow in that, that that's an indication to us of God's love and acceptance for us.

1 Peter 4:8, the witness of the scripture "Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins." There is not one single perfect person in this body except they're perfect in the righteousness of Christ. You get any one of us in a small group and you are going to quickly discover that all of us have areas in our life where we are seeking growth. And all of us have areas of failure. Part of the joy of being in close relationship to other believers is the authenticity of Christian experience that lends.

The devil would like to pick us off, make us isolated and say, You're the only one that's ever down. You're the only one that ever has any problems. You see what a wretch you are? You don't belong to that good church. At Newport-Mesa Christian Center, everybody who goes here has got it together except you.

But that's not true. The next time the devil tells you that say, the pastor said he didn't have it put together.

The joy of acceptance. A student asked me this question. It kind of surprised me. I'd never been asked it before or since. He said, "You as a pastor have a special position in the body, in a place of leadership. Where do you go to when you're hurting? Who do you go to? You

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probably have some group of ministers, something outside the church that you can go to and share what's going on within you when you need help or when you need support and strength. Who do you go to?"

I thought a minute. The question kind of dumbfounded me. The answer even dumbfounded me more because I realized what was really happening in this church fellowship. I said, "You may not believe this but this is the truth. When I need some encouragement, when I need to share, when I need to open up, I find that in this whole church body of which I'm pastor. I find that as pastor I don't have to go outside. People don't have me on a pedestal that says you've got to be a perfect pastor or we don't accept you. But you as a congregation has allowed me the freedom to be myself, a growing Christian.

I think the same freedom you've accorded me is the kind of freedom we want to give one another to grow in Christ. To laying our needs before one another. Not in this sort of false kind of self-disclosure. The Spirit in his own time will cause us to disclose enough about ourselves to others that we'll feel comfortable with and they'll feel comfortable with. But it's a matter of growing together in the Lord. A sense of acceptance.

If this group loves me and accepts me then maybe God loves me and accepts me too.

There is another power of the home group and that is I think the strength of support.

There's an intriguing phrase in the book of Acts, 14:20, that's used of Paul. Paul has been on his first missionary journey. He was in the town of Lystra. He was pelted with rocks and left for dead outside the city. At that point Acts 14:20 tells us "After the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city." I think that is such a significant statement. Here he was stoned and lying there. I doubt that he'd ever gotten back up if somebody hadn't come around and got him back up. It was because another group came to him, a group that he was in close relationship with that he got back up and went to the city. If he had been left that day as he was, pelted with rocks, lying on the roadside for dead and none of the believers had come to his rescue, I think we would have shot thirty years of the apostle Paul's ministry that God yet had ahead of him.

It really dawned on me at looking at this text that I have known persons within this body that have had that very experience. Who have been wounded and hurt, maybe not by real rocks. But have been hurt by spiritual rocks, a psychological rocks and grief and sorrow and depression of all sorts. And the church is great for leaving it's wounded by the side of the road. What is needed in the body of Christ is a caring supporting fellowship where it happened, and it's going to happen to every one of us, there isn't a person in this room who is going to face a time when you are really down and you are hurt and you are wounded and you are bleeding. In that moment to have the body of Christ come to you and pick you up and get you going again.

That doesn't happen in a large group like this. We easily slip in and slip out. You could be gone three or four weeks and if you're not part of a small group or interconnected with other people you can literally drop out of sight. It happens in closer commitments where we can gather around one another.

Part of this mission of this church, us as a body, is to help the wounded get back up. If we don't we're going to simply let the wounded lie unattended and die.

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We don't have the support in this culture of the extended family like many parts of the Midwest and the east where you have generations present – aunt and uncles and granddads, and grandchildren and the like. The church needs to be properly the extended family.

Paul says in Philippians 2:4 “Let each of you look not only to his own interest but to the interest of others.” So we're seeking in the home group support for one another.

Another power of the home group, a fifth power, is the priority that it brings to commitment and discipline.

Luke 12:34 says, “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.” Our treasure is commitment to people and the priority of discipline that is attached to being committed to people.

Many if not most of you are aware of the growth of Full Gospel Central church in Seoul, Korea. A number of years ago this church had begun to grow. They started out with a church of about 200 people. By the time this event happened they were several thousand. Pastor Cho began to be concerned about the fact that there were a lot of individual people in the body but there were a lot of individual people in the body but they weren't really interconnected to one another. If the church was to have a fruitful ministry not only to the world but to itself, it needed somehow to find the webbing of inter relationship.

So he called upon his church for every believer to become a member of a cell group of Christians, of about 10-15 Christians in every cell group. He asked the deacons to head it up. I heard Dr. Cho describe this himself. The deacons started but gradually lost interest and didn't follow through and the whole thing died. Dr. Cho said he was somewhat discouraged with this naturally. He was praying and he felt the Lord say to him, “Ask the women to lead it up.” He protested a while but finally it was very strong. If the men won't do it, have the women do it.

So he asked several hundred women to head up home groups in the church. The deacons were horrified. They protested to no end. They said, “Dr. Cho, this is Korea. You do not do this in Korea.” He said, “I asked you to do it. You didn't do it. So I'm asking the women of the church to do it.” They said, “You're going to split this church right down the middle.” He said, “God's told me this is an important priority and we're going to do it. If you won't, the women will do it.”

So that's how they started out. Gradually the men did begin to get involved. But even today there's a great proportion of women as compared to men in the program. They now have ten to fifteen thousand cell units. They passed a 100,000 believers in their church this year. That's in about 7 or 8 years from about 3000 to 100,000. It has been phenomenal. The reason why this happened and the reason why if you were a member of that church you would not be lost in the crowd is you are not only a part of the large group that shows up on Sunday. But you every week are part of a caring network of Christians who are really concerned about you and will pray for you and bear your burdens and disciple you in Christ.

Dr. Cho told about how one family visited the church and their name got assigned to a home group for follow up. The home group called them and invited them to the home group. Once you get on their list I guess it's kind of hard to get off. Although they're not obnoxious in the

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way they pursue people but they care for people enough to follow them up. That's something that most churches, including ours in Southern California, haven't cared enough to do.

They began following up with this family. The follow up and the love was for this family more than they could handle. They finally said after a number of months of continued inviting to meetings and the like, "We've got to get away from this group. They're going to make us Christians. Let's sneak out of this place." They were living in a large apartment complex.

The family up and moves quite suddenly one day without telling anyone in the group where they were going. They moved to a completely different part of the city. It wasn't a matter of a week or ten days that the network in that church had found this family, traced them. The home group leader over in the other apartment complex on the other side of town comes knocking at their door, "We're from Full Gospel Central church and we would like to invite you to our home group." This family said, What do we do? They gave their lives to Christ is what they did.

A few months ago an incident was related. "A few months ago one Central church member moved from a suburban house to an urban apartment. She quickly found that her neighbor's desire for privacy resulted in a mentality of isolationism. 'God,' she prayed, 'how can make friends with these people. Please help me.' Then she discovered an area of the building that was used by everybody else. The elevator. She began to spend two hours a day riding the elevator. If someone got on the elevator, heavily laden with groceries, she would respond, 'Those groceries look heavy. Let me help you carry some of them.' If someone was struggling with children or babies she would respond, 'What a beautiful baby. Can I hold him so you can take care of your other children?' It was rare that her offers were refused. Not once during those days did she mention Christ or religion. The Holy Spirit had given her very clear directions. Right now, just show them love. They need to be shown love.

Words of her kind deed soon spread throughout the apartment building. Curiosity mounted and several began to question her. 'Why are you doing this?' She replied, 'I'm a Christian. I'm a member of Central Church. I was taught that God loves us. That God wants to give love to us and that when he gives it to us, we should pour it into other people.' Many replied, 'I see so much love in you. I'd like to go to this church you talk about.'

Within a matter of months almost that whole apartment complex had come to faith in Christ because one woman was demonstrating love for people.

I think that's the kind of thing we're talking but when we speak of prioritizing our time and making a discipline of commitment what we want to see long relationships developed among believers and that these groups become the kind of first experience of new Christians or persons who do not yet know Christ in the body of Christ. A safe place to come.

I would like all of you to prayerfully consider making the church your fourth priority. You say that sounds reasonable. You didn't ask for first.

No, God has the first priority. Your family for most of you is your second priority. For most of you, your third priority is your work. You need to make a living. You need to spend forty and in some cases more than that at work.

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Your fourth priority the church. I believe if we could have a congregation of people who would make the church their fourth priority it would be incredible what would happen in this church body. Absolutely incredible.

This is a little fish net. In Mark 1:19 we read that as Jesus was walking along Lake of Galilee, he had called already two disciples who were fishing to follow him. Then he came alongside two others, James and John who were mending their nets. The word “mending” is “to put in order, to restore, to bring back to its proper condition.”

It struck me so keenly as it relates to Jesus’ call, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.” You don’t catch fish if you have a broken net. A church doesn’t really provide an effective ministry to the world if its nets are broken. If people come into the body and they slip out through the net because there’s tornness to it. Mending their net. It’s like the Lord said, “The home ministry is the way that this church body has to mend its nets. Does this church body want to be fishers of men and women for the cause of Jesus Christ, then mend the nets.”

What happens when a net isn’t mended? Generally if there’s a break, you know the fish that drift out the first? The fish that are the least noticed, the littlest fish. If the pastor has gone for three Sundays in a row without explanation then all of you begin to talk: Where is the pastor? He should be here. He’s a more noticed fish in the pond.

But someone maybe who slips out anonymously, gone three or four weeks. Who cares? Who notices?

Why are they slipping through? Because the net isn’t connected. Many times the church is like a group of unconnected strings and the fish keep swimming through. There’s no interconnectedness. What we’re seeking to do through the home group ministry is say, Let’s have a net of relationships where we really care for one another and are aware of the person who’s hurting in the congregation at that moment in their life and needs support and care. Let’s be to one another, equippers.

In fact, in Ephesians 4:11-12 Paul says, “They gave some leaders in the church apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers and evangelists for the mending of the saints for the work of the ministry.” The word in Ephesians 4:12 – the equipping of the saints – is the identical word in the Greek to Mark 1:19 “They were mending their nets.”

There are some in the body who have been called to mend the saints for the work of the ministry. What we want to do is get a good mesh. Will you join with us? Will you be committed to that? Will you take action to do that? I pray that you will.

Lord, it’s really exciting to look through your eyes for a moment, what you would do with this church if you were pastor rather than me. What you would implement. How people would respond to you. Yet Lord, you have chosen somehow to be absent in the body in order to be present in the Spirit. In a very real way you are the pastor of this church. We’re to see ourselves for a moment as responding not to a human leader but as responding to you. To dream the dreams that you have dreamed. To pray the prayers that you have prayed. To see the relationships discovered that you want discovered. To have the kind of truth and love that you want. Lord, our hearts rise to see that availability and possibility. This day, Lord, we want to take concrete steps to reach out and see it and do it. I pray, Lord, that this

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would indeed be a body in which your truth is proclaimed and your love is experienced. Then we would receive a relationship of caring. That persons won't be coming into this church family and walking away after a month saying, Nobody noticed. Nobody cared. But that we will come making determination to give of our life meaningfully to one another. To be with one another in our hours of joy and to be with one another in our moments of being down. To strengthen and up build one another in the faith. Lord, I ask this in your name. Amen.