



# GOSPEL CENTERED COMMUNITY GROUPS

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“I don’t need to know how to know Christ as much as I need to experience Christ.” When I heard this opinion expressed to me, it brought together a collage of conversations into one crisp statement. This insightful student articulated in one sentence a concept that rings through my ears as I minister in the university community today.



Some of us might be so unsettled by this sentiment that we rush to critique it and defend that it is more important to objectively know than to experience. But like it or not, the emerging generations have an operating system of relationship and experience. Students come to believe what they believe by what moves them more than what you can prove to them. It is not that “proofs” and “how to’s” never factor into how this generation processes their beliefs, but they are not the best launching points in their spiritual journey.

As we minister to the student generation, we must create environments in which students can experience Christ in relationship with others. Surely, there is more than one way to address this need. Here we consider how small groups can be a vital part of this solution. Especially in light of the cultural transition, we need group environments that are less about “how to’s” and more about experiencing Christ. We need group environments that are not just from the neck up but that are heart-stirring. We need

communities that not only equip for service but also expose sin and call people to adore Christ. We need Christ-centered communities that transform lives from the inside out.

## THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CENTER

The Apostle Paul describes a transformational community in Colossae as he gives thanks to God for an explosion of the gospel in their midst. He writes,

<sup>3</sup>We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- <sup>5</sup>the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth (Colossians 1:3-6 NIV).

Paul thanks God for the contagious faith in Christ and love for the saints that springs organically from the gospel. The Colossian church’s ongoing belief in the gospel of Christ resulted in multiplying fruit. They experienced transformational community because of the power of the gospel and their continuing captivation with the hope that comes from Christ.

The gospel is not just what unbelievers need to enter into Christ. The gospel is also the way an individual and communities grow in Christ. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan claims, “The gospel is not just the “A-B-C” but the “A-Z” of the Christian life. The gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom, but it is the way to address



every problem and is the way to grow at every step... It tells us that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope—at the same time. In fact, if the gospel is true, the more you see your sin, the more certain you are that you were saved by sheer grace and more precious and electrifying that grace is to you..." (Fellowship Group Handbook)

If we desire transformational communities, we must do something more fundamental than equip students to share the gospel (though we do not neglect equipping). We must help them experience the gospel. We need the electrifying grace of the gospel to grip the hearts of students in our groups because it is the gospel that continuously transforms people.

The gospel of Christ impacts three dimensions: the individual believer, the believing community, and those whom God has called but do not yet believe. When experiencing the person of Christ is the central focus of a group, people from a variety of spiritual backgrounds can benefit equally. If the gospel is the A-Z and not just the A-B-C's, then what the individual, the community, and the lost ultimately need is the person of Jesus Christ.

In a Christ-centered community, the individual believer is invited to open up honestly about his or her life and to see how Christ in the Scriptures applies to his/her life. As each individual enters into one another's lives and the Word, trust and care develops among group members. When group members share in a journey of applying the gospel of Christ to their lives, they begin to experience Christ's love for one another.

As Christ becomes more real to these group members, imagine how students might genuinely talk about Christ to their friends who do not know him. Imagine that dialogue continuing over time until it becomes natural to invite that friend to their open, Christ-centered community. Imagine a student from a fractured family, finding a warm spiritual family. Imagine a student turned off by self-righteous Christians, hearing Christians honestly sharing their struggles. Imagine a student who needs more than one conversation to come to Christ being able to come back each week. This is the environment of a Christ-centered community.

## HOW WE DO IT

Practically, how do you develop small groups that cultivate this kind of community? At the University of Georgia, we have used Community Groups to create this kind of environment. A Community Group consists of six to fifteen students who gather weekly in student residences to share their lives, interact over God's Word, express care for one another, and pray for God's kingdom to expand on our campus and among the nations.

The purpose of a community group is to experience Christ's presence and power as a growing community that expresses Christ's compassion toward each other and the lost. First and foremost, transformational communities need to experience the person of Jesus Christ together. Experiencing Christ happens through continuous practice and belief in the gospel—both seeing our sin problem and marveling in Christ's atonement for our sin.

The Community Group structure does not guarantee experiencing Christ will happen. However, when experiencing the wonder of Christ is the focus, Community Groups may create an environment where this may take place both individually and in relationship with others. When Christ is experienced in community with others, it becomes natural to express his love to one another. And when our hearts are wooed to adore Christ, we are compelled to express his love to those who have not yet experienced his love.

There are five distinctives of our Community Groups.

1. They are open to people from a variety of spiritual backgrounds. Because the searching unbeliever and the maturing believer both have the same ultimate need—the cross of Jesus Christ—groups focused on Christ can be nurturing for people from a variety spiritual stages.
2. Our groups encourage biblical discovery. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. The word of God is the most effective instrument to reveal Christ to us. The small group provides an environment for discovering God's truth together instead of having the group dominated by one person.
3. They thrive on honesty from the heart. Surface-level answers or self-righteous attitudes kill an opportunity to see one another's helplessness and Christ's worthiness. However, honesty about



- our need and hope in Christ becomes compelling.
4. They involve investing in one another and in outside relationships. Staff and student coaches invest spiritually in the lives of core leaders. Core leaders invest in their group members. All group members invest in relationships outside the group in hopes of drawing more into the fellowship.
5. They are committed to multiplying. The group is not an end in itself. It is a base from which group members extend the kingdom within their spheres of influence. When group members have drawn in people to the extent that momentum exists for two new groups, the original group multiplies.

## THE RESULTS

Five years ago we began this experiment of cell groups at the University of Georgia. The ministry was at a low ebb because the small groups were primarily staff led and most of the staff team left.

We have seen the Lord use these Community Groups in some significant ways. Because unbelievers can come and develop relationships, they connect relationally so that when they come to Christ, they stay connected. New believers in our ministry almost always credit their group as a vital part of their process in coming to faith.

Additionally, students learn to apply the gospel of Christ deeply into their hearts in a way that changes their lives more than focusing on changing their behavior ever could. As students apply the gospel to their hearts, they experience more heart level connection with one another because they share their hearts with one another. Ultimately, as a result of these groups, students feel enriched and inwardly compelled to minister the gospel of Christ because Christ has become so real to them.