

Analogy for Shepherding Groups

From the Heart to the Heart. While Shepherding Groups are not the only means whereby we may love others, we do believe that smaller, interactive groups are one of the best means to display intentionally God's Trinitarian care for us. Think of it this way: corporate worship on Sunday is like the heart of a human body. It is the primary organ which pumps life-giving blood to every member of the body, right down to the left pinky. The heart is central; all circulatory activity flows from it or flows to it. We want Shepherding Groups to be like the arteries, veins, and capillaries of the body—channels that help circulate life-giving blood. Consequently, Shepherding Groups are not to be their own thing, disengaged from Sunday corporate worship. Rather, everything that happens in Shepherding Groups during the week should be flowing from or surging toward that time of corporate worship on the Lord's Day. The groups are only part of the greater commitment to display God's triune care by loving one another.

More Information on Shepherding Groups

Why Small Groups? C.J. Mahaney, ed.
<http://www.sovereigngracestore.com/>

The "One Another" sermon series
<http://www.sermonaudio.com/ebcupstate>

Small Group Life in the Power of God's Promises
<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/>



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www.ebcupstate.com



a theology of
shepherding groups
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Definition of Shepherding Groups

Shepherding Groups are small groups of EBC members who meet during the week in order to worship God and edify one another in the faith of Jesus Christ. More specifically, they exist to further Christian fellowship, accountability, and the exercise of spiritual gifts so that believers may grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

Theology of Shepherding Groups

Bases for Shepherding Groups

Displaying the Trinity's Care. Shepherding groups can help the church more gloriously display God's triune care. With every person of His Trinity God lavishly cares for His people, the sheep of His pasture. He has given them in the gospel everything they need; He has given them Himself—for His own glory and their eternal joy. The person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, most vividly reveal the magnitude of this lavish care. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (Jn. 10:15). The resurrected Christ now rules His flock from heaven, and graciously, Jesus has left another token of God's care—the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:7). The Holy Spirit, in turn, gifts certain men to be under-shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28). The Spirit has also gifted every member of the flock of Christ so that those members can build up each other (Eph. 4:7-12). God's own care for His people, then, frees them and enables them to care for one another. Shepherding Groups can give opportunity for more believers to exercise their spiritual gifts for the good of the body, and the body can then better showcase to heaven and earth God's wise care (Eph. 3:7-11). The next basis addresses more specifically how Shepherding Groups can help the church display the Trinity's care.

Caring for One Another. Shepherding Groups can facilitate believers' care for one another. God has commanded believers to exercise specific, reciprocal care for each other. These commands include: "love one another" (Jn. 13:34), "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13), "[b]ear one another's burdens" (6:2), "[teach] and [admonish] one another" (Col. 3:16), "encourage one another and build one another up" (I Thess. 5:11), "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (Ja. 5:16). This kind of care must happen Sunday in the larger, corporate setting (Heb. 10:24), but New Testament Christians also demonstrated this kind of care for each other every day (Acts 2:42, 46). Moreover, the writer of Hebrews commands daily care: "exhort one another every day" (Heb. 3:13). Shepherding Groups can also encourage inter-generational care and discipling (Titus 2:1-8). In short, the smaller setting of Shepherding Groups can increase the believer's opportunities to give and receive the consistent and relational edification, fellowship, and accountability that God desires for His people.

Maximizing Corporate Worship. Shepherding Groups, in providing this kind of care, can also maximize corporate worship. God is calling out a group of people in order that they will worship Him. Throughout the ages He has been freeing His people from sin for the purpose of making them an assembly of worshippers (Ex. 7:16b; Isa. 66:18-21; Eph. 1:12). Today when believers gather together on Sunday for corporate worship they are taking part in something much bigger than what is going on in their local assembly; they are joining this vast array of worshippers, entering into the worship that the saints in heaven are enjoying (Heb. 12:18-29). Just as the physical body cannot function well when it is physically sick, the spiritual body of Christ cannot function well when its members are spiritually sick. Shepherding Groups can provide better care for each member of the body so that when the whole assembly of believers gathers together on Sunday it can carry out at maximum capacity what it was designed to do—worship!

Cautions for Shepherding Groups

Distracting from the Corporate Identity. Shepherding Groups could distract from the corporate identity of EBC. Shepherding groups do not replace the church. They are subservient to the purposes of the larger body, which exists as one united church, not as a confederation of small groups. God designed the church to be a unified community, with Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of one flock (Jn. 10:16).

Glorifying a Method. Shepherding Groups could also generate too much emphasis on a method. This caution is slightly different from the previous caution in that, instead of eclipsing the church's corporate identity, small groups could become viewed as indispensable to the church's identity. Small groups are popular right now, but they are not absolutely necessary in order to have a healthy body of believers. Scripture does not explicitly mandate that the local church partition into small groups. EBC will not hesitate to modify or abandon Shepherding Groups if they are not furthering the biblical purposes of the church.

Encouraging Factionalism. Shepherding Groups could also foster cliques. Paul decries the exclusivity and elitism of saying, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' . . . or 'I follow Christ' (I Cor. 1:12b). Paul counters: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1:13a). Shepherding Groups should never center on favorite personalities, authors, preachers, music, topics etc. The gospel is the epicenter of all Christian fellowship.

Spreading Heresy. Shepherding Groups could also inadvertently allow for the spread of heresy. False teachers are a danger not only to the Ephesian church but also to EBC (Acts 20:29). A false teacher might find a smaller group an advantageous place to start infiltrating his poison into the church. The leadership of EBC must therefore "[p]ay careful attention to [themselves] and to all the flock" in order to avoid the spread of blatant or inadvertent heresy within a Shepherding Group (20:28a).