



s a i n t l o u i s

Center for Christian Study

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Upcoming Events:

Thursday, February 20, 2003

Greg will speak at Campus Crusade for Christ, Washington University

Wednesday, April 9, 2003 (*tentative--details coming soon*)

Dr. Francis Beckwith, author & professor, will speak on human cloning
Memorial Presbyterian Church, St. Louis

Sponsored with the Bioethics Center of St. Louis



Salad Bar Christianity *Community, Consumerism & Church Commitment*

Kicked out of Small Group

A year or so before I started the Center for Christian Study, I started a small group Bible study in my church. Many people I really loved were interested in becoming part of that small group. A few were already members of the church, but most were recent visitors. There were several people interested, though, who were already committed to other solid churches in the area. In very gracious and discreet language, I sent them packing. "I'm not sure this is the group for you. This group is a part of Memorial Pres. If you aren't sure whether God is calling you to this church or the other, you're welcome to come for a few weeks as you discern where God wants you. If it's somewhere else, though, you need to find your primary community there." FYI: That's a nice way of kicking someone out of a small group.

You didn't have to be a church member to be involved in the group—most weren't at first. If you were worshiping elsewhere, though, you had a decision to make. A few people at the time had trouble understanding why I'd make such a seemingly "mean" rule. Granted, I was compassionate about it, gave them time, explained my concerns, let God guide them, but allowed for only the truly rare exception. My reason was simple but profound.

The Pressure to Fill Seats

Starting a new small group can be cause for insecurity, and at the time I was coming off a significant ministry failure. It was tempting to welcome anybody who'd show up to small group, even if their commitment was to a different church. There's so much pressure to fill seats, to find our validation in the numbers of people we draw.

I was hesitant to kick people out of a small group that was only then starting. Still, for their sake—and the sake of all the churches involved—I felt I had no choice.

Why was I so Mean?

Why did I feel I had no choice in this matter? Why point Christians—friends of mine (and frankly, some of the better small group participants)—to the door?

The risk of *Salad Bar Christianity*. Salad Bar Christianity is our tendency to think about churches and ministries as if they were items on a buffet from which we pick and choose. Like items on a salad bar, churches are designed to please us, to "meet my needs." This is religion enslaved to American consumerism. Churches in recent years have tended to become so consumer driven—so focused on creating religious "products" for Christian consumption—that we easily lose sight of the nature of the church. Churches aren't products we judge, stores we shop at, or theaters we visit. *Churches are communities to which belong and give ourselves in love.*

Revolving Door Ministries

The importance of this simple truth took years to press itself upon my conscience. During my seminary years in the mid-1990s, I was singles coordinator in a local church, leading a ministry I cynically came to call *Revolving Door Ministries*. People came in. People went out. We were a popular six-month stopover on the St. Louis church-hopping circuit. Though I saw God do awesome things through that ministry, I came to see it

as a failure. *I had failed in leading it.* I had failed to challenge consumerism, that great idol of the American heart. Christians came into the group, but rarely gave themselves to one another in biblical community. Instead, the group became viewed as a product. They came when *X-Files* was a re-run, or when they felt they “needed” it. I loved when they told me what a great teacher I was, but failed to train them to get outside of themselves to invest deeply in one another.

Some of the group’s members were receiving their Bible study in one church, their worship in a different church, and forming their friendships in a third, taking the best religious product each church had to offer them. The failure, however, was mine. God placed me there with the theological resources to challenge Salad Bar Christianity, idolatrous consumerism, and the resulting loneliness of being spread thin between multiple churches while being disconnected from them all.

Church as Primary Community

When I finally decided to kill that ministry, I committed to work with a new understanding of the church—not church as product, but church as community. Small groups would no longer provide religious products to Christian consumers. They would be intentional relationships with authentic, Word-centered community. They would be tied to a particular church and not permit themselves to function independently. We would study together, pray together, learn together, grow together, and serve together. From then on, I would work with the expectation that Christians in my group would become members of the church, and worship and serve as part of that community. If they were called elsewhere, they would go elsewhere and not spread themselves thin under my watch. Christians are too precious to let them become overbooked and undernourished.

Once my heart became inflamed for the church as *community*, I found I’d discovered what postmodern people really want. Salad Bar Christianity doesn’t satisfy. We were made for relationships. We need one another. After four years, my singles ministry had added only a couple members to the church. Yet the “newer” (older, really) community-centered small group helped add a couple dozen members to the church, resulted in real Christian growth, and deep, lasting friendships. That one group grew and “birthed” three groups—one a Bible study, one a fellowship group, and one an intentionally intergenerational fellowship group.

My experience is not unique. Small groups with members from multiple churches can rarely challenge consumer religion. Despite the best of intentions, they often find themselves underwriting the very patterns of church hopping and *Salad Bar Christianity* they could otherwise overcome through the gospel’s power.

Is there a place for a multi-church effort? Certainly. Among older generations, for example, church hopping has not generally been the problem it has among

younger ones. Many mercy-ministries do best with pooled resources. Nevertheless, when small groups are in view, the evidence shows that groups with members spread thinly between several churches are groups that rarely grow churches. There are few winners in such a situation. To avoid burnout and irrelevance, community must be intentional, constantly nurtured, and pervasive.

Together as a Commitment

The church is ultimately not a product or institution or program or membership organization. Marketing is necessary, institutions a given, programs needed, and membership a requirement. Still, all of these descriptions fall short of the biblical vision. The church is God’s new humanity, his people, the firstfruits of his kingdom, his body bonded together other under Christ the head.

Our identity is not that of isolated individuals who happen to have belief and worship in common. We are one. This togetherness is pictured in the earliest descriptions of the church. Consider Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers ... All the believers were together ... Every day they continued to meet together ... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

On the one hand, we see in this early picture of the church a commitment to the means of grace—a devotion to the Word of God (apostles’ teaching, now collected in the New Testament), to the sacraments (“the” breaking of bread in verse 42), and to prayer. On the other hand, though, we see the context in which all this happens. *Togetherness* is emphasized—not once, not twice, but three times. *Fellowship* was their devotion. This is a description of intentional community, of purposeful, grace-centered relationships. We see nothing here of consumerism, no Salad Bar Christianity, no endless church hopping and church shopping, no continual wandering from ministry to ministry looking for a program that “meets my needs” but probably doesn’t exist. Instead, we see God and his grace in the context of community. We see depth of relationship instead of breadth of activity. We see deep commitment to a particular group of Christians. We see God daily adding new Christians to a Christ-centered fellowship.

When viewed from a biblical perspective—a perspective that accurately reflects our true humanness—the church is a commitment, but far more than a commitment. The church answers the most basic longings of our hearts: the need for community, the need to belong, the need to be accepted, the need to be known, the need for authentic relationships, the need to be encouraged, the need to be supported, and the need to be pointed again and again to our God for whom we were made. ✠