

Articles and Sermons :: The Underground Church By Larry Kreider

The Underground Church By Larry Kreider - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2013/4/17 16:41

During the 1970s I was involved in a youth ministry to the unchurched. One afternoon in 1978, I took a break from youth ministry duties in order to spend some extra time in prayer. I was startled when I heard the Lord speak to me through His still, small voice. "Are you willing to be involved in the underground church?" He asked. The words that I heard in my spirit were distinct, even piercing! Yet, at first I was baffled by what He was trying to tell me.

My mind raced immediately to the Berlin Wall, and the barbed wire fences that then surrounded the borders of many communist nations. I thought of the persecuted church meeting underground in nations that opposed the gospel. It still didn't make sense, yet I knew I had to respond: I had heard the call of God. "Yes, Lord," I replied as tears formed in my eyes. "I am willing." I chose to obey, even though I didn't understand what it all meant.

Soon after the Lord spoke to me about the underground church, I asked some of my Christian friends if they would be willing to meet with me each week for the purpose of enhancing our own spiritual growth. Two men responded. We began meeting every week for prayer, Bible study, encouragement and mutual accountability. Soon our living room was filled to capacity as this "cell group" grew and expanded. Eventually we multiplied into two groups as more people got saved and needed to be nurtured and taught the Word of God.

New Wineskins For the New Wine

Although we tried to get them involved, the new believers simply didn't fit very well in the established churches in our community. It seemed clear that there was a need for new church structures enough to relate to converts from a variety of backgrounds. That's why Jesus said we need to put new wine in new wineskins. "... Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (Matthew 9:16-17).

So began our church's adventure into cell groups. We discovered cell groups to be a place where people have the opportunity to experience and demonstrate a Christianity built on relationships, not simply on meetings. In the cell groups, people could more readily share their lives with each other and reach out with the healing love of Jesus to a broken world.

Cell Groups Are "Underground"

In time, I began to understand what the Lord had in mind when He asked me if I was willing to be involved in the underground church. An underground church can be compared to a tree: its trunk, branches and leaves are only half of the picture. The unnoticed half, the underground root system, nourishes the whole tree and keeps it healthy. The underground church, I began to realize, was to consist of believers gathered together through a structure of small cell groups meeting in homes to pray, evangelize and build relationships with one another. In this way, each believer is made an active and vital part of the body of Christ.

When every believer is nourished and healthy, the whole church is strong. As water and nutrients feed the tree by climbing up through the root system, so the church is nourished and strengthened by what happens in the "underground" (unseen) realm of church life—believers involved in home cell groups. These cell group relationships are not to be mere appendages of the church; in actuality, they are the church. Meeting together in homes and experiencing relationships in cell group life was just as important as meeting together each week in a larger gathering to worship and receive teaching from the Word of God.

When Jesus cursed the fig tree, nothing seemed to happen immediately; however, the following day the tree withered and died. Probably the roots underground had dried up and died instantly, but it took until the next day for the leaves to wither and die due to the lack of water that came up through the root system. The enemy seeks to destroy the church in the same way—from underground. But when the part of the church that is underground is strong, then the whole church will be strong and continue to grow.

Jesus ministered to the multitudes, but He spent most of His time with twelve men, His disciples. Cell groups give everyone an opportunity to get involved, a place where each person can begin using his or her spiritual gifts. The cell

group is the place where he can receive training, instruction and encouragement as he reaches out to his friends and neighbors with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Lord commands us to follow His example. Whatever He has taught us, we are to teach to others. This can be quite effective through small group ministry. In practical Christianity it works the same way. The most effective way for me to teach a young husband how to love and honor his wife is for me to model loving and honoring my wife. The best way for you to teach another Christian how to have a clear financial budget is for you to show him how you set up a budget. If you believe the Lord has called you to teach a new Christian to pray, pray with him! We teach others by modeling biblical truths with our own lives. And it happens most effectively in a small group.

Paul, the apostle, took young Timothy with him as a disciple (Acts 16). Later, Timothy was sent out to do the same: take the truths that he learned from Paul and impart them to others (II Timothy 2:2). Moses had Joshua as his disciple for forty years, preparing Joshua for leadership. Elijah found Elisha and became his mentor. The list goes on and on. The Lord is restoring the truth of balanced, loving discipleship to His church today. He has called us to make disciples in a small group setting.

Christianity is not just sitting in a pew each Sunday morning, looking at the back of someone's head. Christianity is knowing Jesus intimately, reaching out to the lost and making disciples. This must be the motivation of our hearts in order to fulfill effectively the Lord's purposes for us as believers in Jesus Christ. And our homes are ideal tools for fulfilling the purposes of God.

The House to House Principle

How could the 120 disciples in the upper room possibly have taken care of 3,000 new converts? (See Acts, chapter 2.) These disciples were trained by their Master to take responsibility to disciple these new believers. Part of their secret is found in Acts 2:46-47: "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

God's people gathered at the temple and met in small groups in homes, "and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). They began to minister to one another and to the unsaved on an individual basis, and the Lord kept adding to the church daily! In Acts 20:20, the Apostle Paul declares to members of the church at Ephesus, "I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house."

The letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome was written to believers in Jesus Christ who met in people's homes. In his letter to the Romans, Paul indicates that one of these groups met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:3-5).

Paul also sent his greetings to the household of Aristobulus and the household of Narcissus (Romans 16:10-11). When Paul wrote to his friend Philemon, he expressed his greetings to the church in his house, ". . . to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house" (Philemon 1:2).

What Was the Early Church Really Like?

Imagine living in the days of the first century church. T. L. Osborne once told the story of a possible conversation with Aquila in Ephesus, from the book of Acts:

"Good evening, Aquila. We understand you're a member of the church here. Could we come in and visit for a while?"

"Certainly. Come in."

"If you don't mind, we would like for you to tell us about the way the churches here in Asia Minor carry on their soul-winning program. We read that you have been a member of a church in Corinth and Rome, as well as this one here in Ephesus. You should be very qualified to tell us about evangelism in the New Testament Church. If you don't mind, we'd like to visit your church while we're here."

"Sit down, you're already in the church. It meets in my home."

"You don't have a church building?"

“What’s a church building? No, I guess we don’t.”

“Tell me Aquila, what is your church doing to evangelize Ephesus? What are you doing to reach the city with the gospel?”

“Oh, we already evangelized Ephesus. Every person in the city clearly understands the Gospel . . . We just visited every home in the city. That’s the way the church in Jerusalem first evangelized that city (Acts 5:42). The disciples there evangelized the entire city of Jerusalem in a very short time. All the other churches in Asia Minor have followed that example.”

Periodically, down through the ages, the church has lost the New Testament component of meeting in small groups in the homes of individual believers and has placed an emphasis on the church as it meets in large buildings. In fact, according to church history, it was in 323 AD, almost three hundred years after the birth of the church, that Christians first met in a “church building.” For all three hundred years before that, the church met in homes.

“Temple ministry” is beneficial for corporate worship, teaching and celebration, but the Lord wants us to get back to seeing the church as people, not as a place where believers meet. Our homes, places of business, schools, and other circles of contact provide excellent places for the church to meet as we infiltrate our spheres of influence with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Learning From The Methodist Revival

I have had the privilege of proclaiming the gospel on six continents during the past few years. Amazingly, I’ve seen a Methodist Church building in nearly every nation I’ve visited! Some of my Methodist pastor friends tell me that many of these buildings serve as memorials to a past revival. What happened?

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, saw that new wine must be put into new wineskins. He was not only used to spark a mighty revival, but he also created structures that could serve as receptacles of the harvest. Within a century, about one in every thirty Englishmen was Methodists.

A key to the Methodist revival was the accountability that each of these new believers found in small groups. Called “class meetings” by Wesley, these groups were, in effect, cell groups. Men and women were appointed as “class leaders” to conduct the meetings and disciple the converts.

Howard A. Snyder, in *The Radical Wesley* tells us,

The classes normally met one evening each week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and received the support and prayers of the others . . . According to one author it was, in fact, in the class meeting “where the great majority of conversions occurred.

The class meeting system tied together the widely scattered Methodist people and became the sustainer of the Methodist renewal over many decades. The movement was in fact a whole series of sporadic and often geographically localized revivals which were interconnected and spread by the society and class network, rather than one continuous wave of revival which swept the country.

Without the class meeting, the scattered fires of revival would have burned out long before the movement was able to make a deep impact on the nation . . .

Now here is the remarkable thing. One hears today that it is hard to find enough leaders for small groups or for those to carry on the other responsibilities in the church. Wesley put one in ten, perhaps one in five, to work in significant ministry and leadership. And who were these people? Not the educated or the wealthy with time on their hands, but laboring men and women, husbands and wives and young folks with little or no training, but with spiritual gifts and eagerness to serve . . .

The system which emerged gave lie to the argument that you can’t build a church on poor and uneducated folk. Not only did Wesley reach the masses; he made leaders of thousands of them. “

In time the Methodist believers began to put more of an emphasis on the Sunday morning church meetings in their buildings. As they de-emphasized the accountable relationships they had in their class meetings, the revival movement began to decline. May we not make the same mistake in this generation! Let us see that small groups have often served to fan the fires of revival throughout church history. As we seek to ignite a discipling movement in our own time, we must place the local prayer and support group concept at the very center of our strategy. The great reformer Martin Luther proposed that widespread spiritual renewal should take the form of ecclesiolae in ecclesia—little churches within the church.

The church of today should take a lesson from the early church and the successful revival movements in church history.

Often with only minimal success, we have clung to traditional church structures while trying to reach people for Christ with extravagant church programs and high-tech methodology. Though such methods may have their place, they can never substitute for personal relationships formed in the context of genuine Christian community.

House to House Revival

God's original design was for home groups to be foundational to every other aspect of church life. They provide a place where the lost can be led to Christ, demons can be cast out, the sick can be healed and a strong biblical foundation can be laid in the lives of new believers. Home group ministry teams will actually provide the bulk of the work in equipping the saints, including teaching and pastoring. Rather than being isolated units, the home churches serve as ideal vehicles to incorporate new believers into larger congregations.

Jesus' vision to revolutionize the world was pretty simple—its focus was person to person and house to house. Out of the multitudes of His followers, He appointed only twelve to be His disciples. "Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach." (Mark 3:14). By living closely with them, day in and day out, He gave them intense training, demonstrated His miraculous power, explained His parables, and answered their questions. A disciple is a learner, an apprentice. Jesus provided His disciples with innumerable opportunities to practice and exercise the things He taught them. He poured His life into them by close, daily contact for three and a half years.

As we observe Jesus interacting with these twelve men, we see a model of what could be regarded as the first cell group in the history of the church! Just as a cell is the basic building block of the physical body, so the "cell group" network can provide a fundamental source of life for a congregation.

Running a Rescue Shop

C.T. Studd, the famous missionary to Africa once said: "I do not wish to live 'neath sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell." The main purpose for every cell group must be to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell. Otherwise, the cell becomes a social club without any power. The Lord gives us power to be witnesses, not to sit around and enjoy nice comfortable "bless-me" meetings. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The church is not primarily a hospital; it is an army. Although armies do have medical units, they are for the purpose of getting the soldiers healed so they can get out on the battlefield and destroy the enemy. The focus is not the medical unit. The focus is on the battle and in winning the war. We are in a spiritual war! We do not have time to sit around and play church like children play war games. We need to rise up in faith and be the church and destroy the works of darkness in Jesus' name!

When I was a young man, our nation was in the midst of the Vietnam war. Every year, Bob Hope would take an entourage to Vietnam to entertain the soldiers. Now let's face the facts. No one joined the army to go to Vietnam to see Bob Hope. They went to Vietnam to fight a war! However, while they were there they had the fringe benefit of being entertained by Bob Hope and his company. Although the primary purpose of the cell group is to reach the lost and disciple new believers, we also experience the fringe benefit of tremendous fellowship and relationships with people who care about us. They stand with us as we face hardships and struggles.

The Jethro Principle

At one point Moses was wearing himself out by continually listening to and solving the disputes and dilemmas which arose among the Israelites (see Exodus 18:13-26). He was weighed down by the responsibilities that came with serving more than three million people. The Israelites were burdened by having to wait day after day for Moses to hear their case. This reminds me of many pastors today. Many church leaders are nearing burnout, as they try all by themselves to juggle the crushing ministry responsibilities of the church.

Through Jethro, God gave Moses wisdom to rule in such a way that he and the people would not be worn out. The solution Jethro suggested was simple: Able men were to be selected from among the people to listen to any problems which arose, solve the ones they could handle, and pass on the most difficult cases to Moses.

The early apostles understood the principle of delegation Moses had used many years before. During the great revival that took place in the book of Acts, the apostles soon found it necessary to delegate authority and responsibility to others so they could concentrate on their top priority—prayer and the ministry of the Word (see Acts 6:1-4).

Many times today, those in primary leadership in the church are so caught up in management that they do not have time to pray and give clear direction to the work of God. Applying the Jethro principle to the local church today would result in the delegation of authority and responsibility to believers on the "front-lines" of ministry, who are best prepared to make such decisions anyway. Unless pastors can release responsibility and authority to the servant-leaders at a small group level, this principle will not work. Although local elders or pastors are responsible before the Lord for God's people in the cells, the cell leaders must be released and trusted with the care of the people of God within their cell.

When David Yonggi Cho from Seoul, Korea, was at our church for a pastors' conference, I talked to him about the need to release local leadership in a small group setting. I will never forget his response. "Many pastors are threatened," he said. "They are afraid to release their people."

Moses gave Pharaoh the mandate of the Lord: "Let my people go!" I believe that the Lord is setting every believer free to be an able minister of the new covenant. May every spiritual leader maintain his security in the Lord and take the risk to release the people of God to minister to others.

Rick Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California says it like this. "For your church to grow, both the pastor and the people must give up control: The people must give up the control of the leadership, and the pastor must give up control of the ministry. Otherwise, either party can become a bottleneck for growth."

My prayer for those I am responsible to disciple and train is that they may be used of God in a much greater way than I have been used. Jesus told His disciples that those who believe in Him would do the works He does and even greater works (John 14:12). And John the Baptist, a type of New Testament Elijah, stated clearly, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). John's whole life was consumed with preparing the way for Jesus. The Lord has called us as cell leaders, pastors and Christian leaders to do the same—to see Jesus and others increase as we decrease. This must be our motivation. We are preparing servant leaders for the next generation.

A few years ago, I turned over the leadership and ministry of our church to eight pastors, twenty-one elders, and a whole host of cell leaders as our church decentralized and became eight cell based churches. Our new pastoral leaders were disciplined at the grassroots level, in our cell groups. I now am able to focus my attention more on the areas of my primary gifting: training leaders and being a pastor to pastors.

The Need for New Vessels

In II Kings 4:1-7 the story is told of Elisha miraculously multiplying the oil of a poor widow. As long as the widow had vessels to pour the oil into, the flow of oil continued. But when she ran out of vessels, the supply of new oil was halted.

In many ways this story is a prophetic picture of the present purpose of God for the church. He has promised to pour out His Holy Spirit in these last days, but this will necessitate flexible containers to hold the great harvest that is on the horizon. Is it possible that the Lord is waiting for His church to prepare the proper containers so He can fully pour out His Spirit?

Now is the time to prepare leaders for the coming harvest. We cannot force new Christians into our old wineskins—we must prepare new wineskins for the new wine. Forming new vessels will facilitate the Lord's commission to make disciples. Many new types of vessels (cell groups and local congregations) must be formed. Let's get about our Father's business.

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