

# Open Bible Study and the Small Church

a work for Christ, in Christ, and by Christ

a way to do good for, and with,  
many people

Jonathan E. Brickman

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The author is prepared to deliver printed copies at need, and can be reached here:

Jonathan E. Brickman  
805 SW Jewell Ave  
Topeka, KS 66606-1610  
[jbrickman@joshuacorps.org](mailto:jbrickman@joshuacorps.org)

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To the Word, the Will, and the Way of God

## 1. The Need

Why are so very many people avoiding all churches?

In some places, this question is not a question. But God has sent me to Topeka, Kansas, USA, where this question is very loud to the questioning mind. And there are other places where this question is almost as loud, or louder.

And there are related questions. Why are so many churches so weak and fruitless? Why are so many churches so poor in truth and righteousness, increasingly popular?

To me, it seems that the first question carries the most weight. I think that if we were to handle this question well, a gaping hole in the love of the Holy Church of Jesus Christ would be filled. It seems to me that if we do well in this, the needs of a great many of the sheep of the Lord are met; and not just in this place, but in many other places.

We have only one hope: the One Person who is the Word of God. We have only our hope in Him, by which we can do very good for these people and for all of us, in His Will and His Way. We must look to Him if we desire to do good. We will fail, if we look to anyone or anything else.

## 2. The Need Explored: History

Something has changed. Things were not always this way.

At many times in the past, the churches have been strong, and in those times, the vast majority of the people living in this area were regular participants. There were very different kinds of churches, which often did not cooperate -- but the point is, the vast majority were members of a church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Also, almost all of them were within strong biological families.

There was much life together. The people of the churches loved each other, played with each other, worked together, took care of each other, and often took care of their neighbors, and rather often did these things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, there were tremendous hypocrites -- but if you walk among the remainder of the adults of that generation, I think you will find that they were a minority.

Close spiritual care and fellowship was available to the people primarily from others within their families, and failing this, care was available through other non-biological "aunts" and "uncles", and other good family friends. Church preachers were primarily given the role of handling large-group dynamics, and this is almost all of what was expected of them.

There were churches for every category of person. There was almost no one here who was entirely unwelcome in every church, though there certainly were many churches which would welcome only a very narrow range of people.

But this order has fallen.

### **3. The Need Explored: Today**

Today in Topeka, Kansas, there is a population of approximately 150,000 (122,377 in the 2000 U.S. census). This population is being served by almost exactly 300 churches. If we calculate, we come to 407 people per church. And yet, a large majority of the churches in Topeka serve less than seventy (70) people every Sunday morning.

Clearly, something is wrong.

It is common to blame it all on the younger generations, as if their parents had no responsibility for proper education of their young, and as if their parents were not themselves abandoning righteousness in droves. I suggest that the blame should rest upon the sin of all men and women, both older and younger. But there are a few more things which are also clear.

The strong biological family is quite rare.

People tend to interact with other people far less, and with things far more.

The elders who are wise, do their best to interact with people, including and even especially young people, far more than things.

But most of the younger people do not know how to cooperate. They often cannot communicate well with the wise elders, because the younger people have the habit of interacting primarily with things: the result of the television and other interactive toys having been used as babysitter.

I was one of them. I occasionally ventured into churches because I was lonely. I rapidly grew to avoid churches because that loneliness was never addressed. I have discussed this with quite a few people of many age-groups, ranging from thirteen to eighty-five, and this is an extremely consistent reason why people consider church-life to be irrelevant to them.

### **4. Sad Consequences**

There are many people who consider church-life to be extremely important. This group is willing to be very lonely in church, as long as they are in a church on Sunday (or Saturday, depending). Most of them are elders. Many of them are children who believe their parents' and grandparents' words in this regard. There are a devoted sprinkling of others. These will attend, unless something major stops them.

But they don't stop trying to get their needs met.

Whole congregations are looking towards the nearest preacher, one single person, to provide good and loving communication. Sometimes that preacher has a few helpers. But they are the only ones publicly designated for it; so they are the focus.

And the preachers are becoming overloaded, and most horribly. Often they are formally requested by the governments of their churches to work upwards of 100 hours per week. Often they are kicked out for failure to meet such insane demands.

So more and more, people of all ages avoid churches. They avoid churches, because they see that they cannot get their needs met by the one horribly overloaded preacher and the very few officially designated assistants he might have.

## **5. More Consequences**

A pontiff is a person who acts vaguely like a king in a church or a group of churches, who presumes that he has the authority to speak with overriding authority on all things, or on most things, in his dominion. A pontiff habitually shuts down other people, with a word or a phrase or a command, in order to cause his voice to be heard, as much as he or she can.

Jesus Christ was not and is not a pontiff. He humbled Himself at all times, to listen to the smallest voices around Him. He said that we must do so too, if we are to do good.

A great many preachers know it is wrong to be a pontiff. But many preachers are retreating into being so, rather than encouraging free and open fellowship and love in Christ. They do this because they cannot do better. They become control-freaks, and most of them hate it; but they cannot find anything better to do.

Preachers are also publicly and privately complaining about people who bounce from church to church. All sorts of blame is thrown around for this, almost always landing on the people doing the bouncing. But I have spoken to many of the people bouncing around, and there has been one thing consistent: all of those with whom I have spoken are lonely, and they are hoping that in the next church, there will be something different.

When a person, particularly a younger person, leaves the TV set for the church-meeting, he or she wants human interaction. But interaction means both people get to talk. Pontiffs don't help them; they hurt them.

## **6. For Whom This Book Is**

This book is written not mostly for preacherpeople, but instead mostly for everyone else. Practicing preacherpeople are almost all overloaded, and most of them, horribly so. It is pointless to try to give them more to do, because they have nothing they can imagine casting aside. It is pointless to try to help them find something of theirs which they can cast aside, because it is likely that if they try to take such advice, some of the people directly responsible for their livelihood -- the trustees or other persons controlling a traditional church -- will start, ever so slightly, to hate them for not being what they want him or her to be.

In this evil day, the position of preacher is not easy or simple, and we must strive to never burden them more than necessary. If we are willing and we ask, the Lord Himself will give us many good things to do; and I suggest that this is what we should be doing. I suggest that it is very good for us to gently ask preachers for feedback and oversight, according to their ability and time. But I very strongly suggest that if we want major additions to the works done by the Body of Christ, we must be willing to work in Him without constant presence and constant involvement of our terribly overloaded preachers.

## **7. The Need As Addressed Elsewhere: The Cell-Church**

There is one way which certain churches of the Lord are using to address this situation, and for them it is bearing fruit. So far as I have been able to learn, it began approximately thirty years ago, in South Korea. On a worldwide basis, it is most often called the "cell-church". The cell-church is usually defined as a church designed according to a structure which is quite different than the structure of all traditional churches. But the definition does not include any violations of Scripture.

The great focus of the traditional church is a meeting of a fairly large group of people, who meet for worship each Sunday morning. At this large meeting, the traditional church engages in whichever activities it (or its leadership) desires. In all cases these activities are a subset of those which are described in the New Testament as being characteristic of churches of Jesus Christ. There may be other meetings of one or more smaller groups, but the great focus of traditional church life is this large meeting.

In the cell-church, the great focus is not the large meeting, but instead, is meetings of very small groups called "cells". A "cell" contains between three and twelve people, and a "church" is always described as a collection of cells. The whole church does meet on occasion -- depending on the church, sometimes once per week, or once per month, or (when the church is very large) a few times per year. But the primary focus is the cells.

## **8. Benefits of Some Cell-Church Concepts**

The most important benefit of some cell-church concepts is the fact that all who participate receive the close personal care in Christ that they need, without overburden on the preacher and his few very close assistants. It also serves to help replace a dying trend of this world.

In the past, the members of the traditional church in the U.S.A. relied on a friendly local society to maintain close personal care. People of traditional churches here once relied upon the local society to teach and encourage good behavior and worship of the Lord; this is no more. And unlike in other places, the people of the traditional churches here mostly do not know how to maintain holy society within the perverted society which surrounds them. This is because they were never taught how to do so, and so are not being given the tools to do so.

Today, just as in the past, members of the traditional churches here often use coercion by force to cause their surrounding society to serve their needs for personal care. They often use lawsuits and word-battles in legislatures and wars and other ways of this world, to force nonbelievers to violate their own consciences, to service the churches. I suggest that this behavior by people who claim Christ is, in truth, evil. I suggest that the Lord has commanded us to win for Him by love, and not by making ourselves lords of the world.

And I suggest that more and more people both in and out of Christ know these things. I suggest that as this knowledge permeates, both inside and outside churches, additional behavior within churches will be increasingly required if we are to receive the loving personal care in Christ which we need.

I suggest that for this purpose and in places like this, some cell-church concepts are very useful. But not all.

## **9. An Issue of Conflict**

On the surface, the cell-church has appeared to many as being ready-made to solve their problems, everywhere there is a need to help church members and seekers learn and become strong in Christ, and every time there is a need to help preachers who cannot do all of that which is desired of them. But there is an issue.

**In the places in the world today where there are large and strong cell-churches, there is (a) a strong local cultural belief in the value of uniformity of human behavior for large groups of people, and (b) a lack of pre-existent strengths in the churches of the Christ.**

For instance, in South Korea, there is (a) a strong local cultural belief in group conformity to codes of human behavior (a legacy of many non-U.S.A.-centric philosophies of the world), and (b) a local great weakness of the pre-existent arms of the Body, e.g., Romanism, Protestantism, Reformationism, Restorationism, Baptistism, Methodism, et cetera. The same is true, in different ways, in every locale I have thus far studied at which there is a large and strong cell-church.

But when we study Topeka, Kansas, U.S.A. in the same vein, there are major differences. To cite the items above, (a) there is here a strong common belief that uniform behavior of groups of people is always evil, because of local cultural definitions, including that of cultism, and historical fascism, and so-called Communism; and (b) there remains here much strength in many of the existing churches of the Christ.

## **10. We Must Not Weaken Anything of God**

The details are many, the point is simple: there is no partial vacuum here. We must not try to destroy or weaken anything even slightly profitable to God, even if our efforts are to build something better, because God will maintain and defend anything profitable to Him: He loves His people, and He is very slow to anger.

Instead, we must simply add good to the mix. We must do that which, in the Spirit, might be analogous to the flying buttresses of old, in order to build up the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ that God has built here.

There is another reason why we must not try to destroy or replace. If we do something which attempts a destruction or deletion of something partially good, or even slightly good, we provoke our brothers to evil. And the Lord Jesus Christ has said that it is evil for us to provoke our brothers to evil.

We cannot form groups completely free of evil, because we are not completely free of evil. But we can work to help the good everywhere it is. And there is much good in every church in which there is belief into the Lord Jesus Christ as He is described in Holy Scripture.

## 11. A Ray To Follow

It is suggested that building of small groups in Christ is very good. But if we are to do well with this people, we must build very differently than the cell-church. Why not build open groups, which may include members of multiple churches, as well as those whom traditional churches have failed to welcome?

Why not work to glorify only God, by bringing all sorts of His people together for small groups? Why not do this for the purposes of fellowship and group sharing of the fruits of the Holy Spirit? Why not set some of these up in public places, so as to open ourselves to persons not involved with churches?

It is already common for relatively successful churches to have "small groups", either by that name or by several others. But very often, these groups are simply traditional Sunday school classes by different names. In these, there is one designated pontiff, and the rest are designated listeners. Although this is a family setting by the standards of this world, this is not a family setting according to the standards set by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord commanded His greatest servants to always humble themselves before everyone else, and so He did, too. When a woman (!) dared backtalk to the Lord in assembly, and she spoke truly, He rewarded her. I suggest that this is essential to a truly Godly family group.

If we have a small group dominated by a pontiff, it is that pontiff's words which will be heard, far more than God. But if we have a small group in which the keeper or keepers strive to encourage God to speak through all present, God will be heard, far more than men.

## 12. Some Specifics

I suggest that we should build groups which are meetings for fellowship in Christ, according to the example of the Lord Himself. I suggest that as much as possible, we should build each of them to contain members of multiple churches.

I suggest that in these groups we must have our top priorities set on fellowship. I suggest that this means that the keeper or keepers of a group must keep the priority on brotherly-sisterly love in Christ, and (if the group decides) Holy Communion with the Lord, **and explicitly not on the words of any one human pontiff, or any one human agenda.**

There may well be an agenda-set Bible study, but this is not one of the top priorities. There might be tableaux in which one person speaks at length and the others listen...but these must exist only according to the attention and desires of all of the listeners, and not according to the desires of the speaker. Sometimes there may be singing to the Lord as a second priority. But the top priority must remain singular: at all times, if anyone in the group has a holy thought to share, or a holy concern to ask for advice or prayer about, he or she must be given the floor, and any other item must be made to wait.

There is one interesting pattern we have found helpful; I do not know if it might be helpful to all, or not, but God has used it helpfully, every time we have put it into place. It is a concept of the church-at-table, where all at the meeting sit at the same level, at one table or many, as did the Lord and His disciples at the Last Supper. The Lord spoke of our eating with Him at His table in Heaven in the future; thus, we prepare. It helps when working to minimize the intimidation which newcomers feel to any gathering of people.

To some, it is obvious how to help such a group form and persist. To some, it is entirely alien. But it can be learned through experience. We have seen it happen.

### 13. Implementation To Date

We are referring to these concepts using the terms "Open Bible Study", "small church", and simply "church". An "Open Bible Study" is simply a small group of three to twelve people that meets weekly, according to the above. A "small church" includes the above and adds group prayer, Holy Communion, and song; it is truly a church, according to the things the Lord has said.

Right now we have one entity, a small church which met in our home from 2000 to 2006, and for six months has been meeting in a borrowed meeting-room; it meets every Friday night, a very good alternative to common pursuits. We have plans in place to divide into small groups for prayer as numbers indicate (ten and up, usually; our maximum has been sixteen), and we will have multiple Bible studies happening too if God increases us to twenty. We had an Open Bible Study running for three years a while back, and another is expected to begin within a week or so (as of 1/1/07), as there has been strong interest expressed.

It is not easy to follow the models written above, and I often do not do well. I often find myself in a state of unGodly frustration! Sometimes I have something I want to say, and two or three other people have other things, very often better things, to say than I do. And no matter whether or not I think the others have better things, I should let them speak before me, if I am to be properly humble before God and man. I therefore do not believe it is correct to consider the successes to date to be a credit to myself or the other men and women who are working in this way. I believe that it is only correct to credit God. He has given to us the things to do, and He has chosen to give us the fruits. We are very grateful.

### 14. Child-care

Perhaps the greatest issue we have not yet had to address is child-care. But there is a closely related issue, which we must address before we study child-care directly.

One tradition of men, written in the New Testament, specifies that it is a shame for a woman to speak at all in assembly, but must seek righteousness only through child-bearing. But Jesus Christ personally encouraged women to speak in assembly. Jesus Christ chastised His disciples when they sought to silence women who did so. And He greatly rewarded a certain Canaanite woman, when she talked back to him, when she suggested an exception to a ruling which He made against her.

I strongly urge that we follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ in this matter. I suggest that we must humble ourselves. I suggest that where an O.B.S. or small-church includes parents, every member both spiritually and physically acceptable for helping should be eager to take a stint at one of the humblest of activities: babysitting. I suggest that a different member each week be designated, in round-robin fashion, if possible. I suggest that the decision as to who is acceptable for such duty must be made through wholehearted agreement between potential babysitters and parents. If this is done, all will receive maximum benefit.

And similar arrangements for older children needing supervision will follow the much same pattern. A mostly-teen O.B.S. might do well in another room of the same house in which a group of their elders was meeting, all according to best profit unto God.

Of course, additional care must be taken in a teen-oriented O.B.S. to strongly encourage all questions. They have been discouraged mightily. And effective chaperonage is essential.

## **15. Decision-making**

Every small group must make decisions which affect the whole, at least every once in a while. I suggest that it is very good to remember that majority vote is not according to anything of God in Scripture.

Decision by lot is in Scripture. This is deliberate use of the fact that God makes all things work for His benefit. If we do this, we use events falsely called "random", we use decisions made by something very like throws of dice. This is in the New Testament...but the people of God have almost all abandoned this element of righteousness. And I have found it to be a great and terrible temptation to reverse the results of a decision by lot. Thus, in our groups, we must tread very carefully when decisions must be made.

We have thus far found great profit by striving for full agreement of everyone in the group, before making changes.

But there is another method, for some issues: Decision by agreement of just two or three. We have found it good to encourage general freedom by encouraging three persons in agreement to decide on efforts, override being possible by other groups of three. The most prominent use of this to date, is in choosing members of a ministry team. The ministry team consists of persons known for general reliability in the purposes of Christ, who are given responsibilities involved with maintaining the holy nature of the meeting.

## **16. Discipline**

Discipline can be a problem. But I suggest that it should be considered only if certain people repeatedly try to cause others to sin. I suggest that any other application is hypocrisy, because we all cannot help but sin.

When we have a person or persons repeatedly trying to cause others in our midst to sin, I suggest that the following guidelines be used, all of which come straight from the mouth of the Lord Jesus.

First, we approach such a person privately. If he or she does not hear us and persists, we do the same with two or three others. If the same results, we approach with more, either their entire O.B.S. or another loving group close to him or her. If we are still not heard, we behave towards them as Jesus behaved towards Pharisees and tax collectors: we befriend and love, unless they will not have us.

The purpose is always to maximize the love and fellowship of all.

## 17. Growth and Faith

In many churches, cell and not, it is common to judge cells and members by the frequency of cell multiplication, and to do this judgment with very rigid standards of growth over time. I suggest that this is not at all good. I suggest that this encourages the sins of materialism and the pride of life, both of which produce much evil.

Instead, I suggest that we should be grateful to God, and should consider ourselves successful, when we find that we are being helpful to God in any way at all, however small.

Let us strive never to forget that it is only God that is good. Let us strive never to forget that all good we ever do is credited as work far more by God, than by us. It is He who made us. It is He who made all that we use. It is He who has done almost all that ever has been done and ever will be done. All of us have only a tiny place, and tiny things to do, to help the Mighty One who is God with His good works. They may look like big things, but to God, nothing we can do is big, because the truth is, we are very small indeed.

So let us be humble. Let us be eager to see good results, and entirely patient about quantity. Let us not judge ourselves failures when we find that we are not building groups at any particular rate. Let us do as some would prefer us not to do, and let God give us our motivations and our fruits in His sweet time. Let us be happy with the small things God gives us: when compared with God, the only things we can ever have are small.

Let us not choose personal goals for ourselves. Let us simply persist, by the driving force not of our will, not of our way, but of the Spirit of God in us.

## 18. Persons

Some people put their trust in large and elaborate structures of super-duper-leaders and super-leaders and leaders and sub-leaders. Others put their trust in various man-written codes of church operation and behavior. Still others use different variations on both themes. And regardless of all else, most today put trust in \$50,000 scraps of parchment, a concept thoroughly alien to all of the commandments of God.

I suggest that if we are to be successful in the works of God, we must trust only the Word of God on the subject. And according to Him, we must know people according to their fruits, according to what their works accomplish for His purposes. If we trust the Lord on this subject, we will not be trapped by the dead logic by which only "officially licensed" pastors are permitted to love people, to give holy fellowship and counsel, as Jesus did. If we trust the Scripture on this subject, elders will again be very useful to God, according to the Way of the Lord.

I suggest that fellowship and love is the only good foundation of trust. I suggest that, as Jesus commanded, upon fruits alone there should be judgment. We should not obey or revere men who claim God because of \$50,000 scraps of parchment. We should obey or revere them only if they show God to us.

I suggest that as Jesus commanded, none of us should call ourselves "leaders"; but if others choose to follow us, if God leads them to do so, we should accept humbly, and never be proud of ourselves, of what God is doing to us. Let it be God who draws the sheep to His undershepherds, and let it not be His undershepherds who throw bonds upon His sheep. Or to put it all another way, let us do as the Lord Jesus Christ did and as He told us to do, rather than doing that which is customary almost everywhere in this world.

We have learned that a ministry team is essential. When the group as a whole does not know who to look to for help in maintaining the holiness of a meeting, chaos can gain foothold. But the ministry team must not dominate. The focus must remain on the things the Lord has said, most especially when

He brings forth His questions and His answers through the questioner and the unbeliever.

## **19. Omissions for the Glory of God**

There are other items I suggest we omit, all of them boiling down to unholy glorification of men. For example, I suggest that it is not good to hold awards ceremonies for persons building new groups. This practice glorifies human institution and human works, and builds the sinful pride of men, and therefore is evil, because anything which glorifies men does not glorify God.

There are apparent benefits to such activity. But I suggest that the apparent benefits come at the terrible price, in the long term if not the short, of secret pride. I suggest that the same is true of all nationalisms, and racialisms, and other servitudes to the things of this world and the loves of men.

These issues must be dealt with as they arise. The point is, we are not out to make anything but God look good. We are not out to make the O.B.S. or small church concepts look good; we are not out to make our small-churches look good; we are not out to make any large churches or other subdivisions of the Body of Christ look good; and we are not out to make ourselves look good. Our purpose is singular and simple: to help those who have ears to hear, to come into the Kingdom of Heaven.

## **20. Postscript and Prayer**

Reader, I pray God to bless you. I ask Him to use us all for His good fruits. I will be very pleased to learn any opinions you may have on the entire contents above, whether they be contradictory, in agreement, or in addition.

Jonathan E. Brickman  
jbrickman@joshuacorps.org  
(785) 233-9977  
805 SW Jewell Ave, Topeka, KS 66606-1610  
<http://joshuacorps.org>