

# Alone in a Big Church

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes the necessity of small groups within the church for fostering community, spiritual growth, and mutual support among believers.*

**Scripture:** Hebrews 3:12

**Topics:** "Church Community", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

John Piper preaches about the importance of developing smaller forms of togetherness within the church, emphasizing the Biblical basis for believers to engage in spiritually sensitive small groups for ministry and support. He highlights Ephesians 4:11-12 as the blueprint of God's living temple, showcasing the role of spiritual leaders in equipping the saints for ministry to build up the body of Christ. Piper stresses the need for intimate, regular gatherings where believers can minister to each other, provide exhortation, encouragement, and support, ultimately fostering strong faith, love, and good works.

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## Transcript

September 20, 1981

Ephesians 4:11-12

A CALL TO SMALL TOGETHERNESS I have a deep confidence that God's hand is upon us for good here at Bethlehem in the calling of our ministers. Let me describe briefly what I think the Lord is doing and what he aims to do. About 14 months ago the church called me to be pastor with the expectation that I would devote myself primarily to the ministry of the Word and to prayerful oversight of our total ministry. During those first months together we prayed and we pondered what priorities of ministry should guide our call of an associate pastor. The decision was that he should be a person gifted to develop both a ministry of outreach and a ministry of nurture through the building of support groups throughout the congregation. We saw a vital link between the rich group life and sustained, joyful outreach. Last February Glenn Ogren was called to help equip us for these ministries. In addition the church is committed to providing the best possible spiritual leadership for our youth, and to that end Tom Steller, Cory Dahl and Gregg Heinsch were called to work with our college, senior high and junior high young people. At the other end of the age spectrum we have numerous elderly people who can't get out to services and the church sought the help of David Carlson to provide a steady link between these people and the gathered assembly. And finally as of this month, Bruce Leafblad has joined us to lead in worship and music.

The implication of all this is that we are in the infant stages of our ministry together. There is so much potential for God-honoring, life-changing ministry in this place! And one of the greatest potentials of all lies in the emergence of many small support groups within our larger congregation. Glenn and I have been praying for months about how to develop a network of faith-nurturing cells in the larger body here at Bethlehem. The specific suggestions that we have I will mention at the end of the message. But the main thing I want to do this morning is provide a Biblical basis for why we believe it is very important for you all to be involved in some form of spiritually sensitive small groups. We are issuing a "call to small togetherness" and we are very eager for you to agree it is a call from God and not from men. Therefore, I want us to look at several passages from God's word which I think have moved Christians again and again throughout the centuries to seek small forms of togetherness, as well as larger forms.

The first text I want us to look at is Ephesians 4:11,12. This text is the Magna Carta of church ministry. It is the blueprint of God's living temple. It is a description of how the body of Christ must work in order to fulfill its God-ordained purpose. In verse 8 Paul says that when Christ ascended, he gave gifts to men. Then verse 11 describes those gifts as people, and tells us what their purpose is. "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Most of us are able to keep clear in our minds the origin and goal of Christian ministry: its origin is in Christ, who gives spiritual gifts and gifted people to the church; and its goal is the upbuilding of the body of Christ in knowledge, faith and love. But what we don't keep as clear is the living, dynamic, God-appointed process that moves from origin to goal. Notice very carefully what it is in these two verses. God gives to a church spiritual leaders whose role is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. And from the work of the ministry by the saints, the body is built up. God's pattern for producing people with powerful faith and genuine love is not to have the pastor-teachers do all the work of the ministry. They are to equip the saints to do the ministry. And the saints are not a class of Christians. They are you, all of you, who have set yourselves apart for God through faith in Christ. According to God's pattern, the upbuilding of the body in faith and love is the immediate result of the ministry of the laity, not the ministry of the clergy.

The question this raises for us is whether the forms of our togetherness provide adequate settings in which your ministry to each other can happen to the extent that the New Testament wants it to happen. The answer to the question is a resounding NO! We have four regular forms of togetherness here at Bethlehem - Sunday morning, for high worship with a focus on God; Sunday evening, for a more informal time of praise and study and telling each other what the Lord has done; Sunday School for the imparting of Biblical knowledge; and Wednesday evening for corporate prayer. To be sure, in all of these settings you minister to each other. But what we are convinced of is that the New Testament calls for a kind of personal ministry among the saints that cannot be fulfilled in these larger forms of togetherness. Therefore, we want to issue a "call to small togetherness." We believe that only in such smaller groupings will you, the saints, really be free to do the work of the ministry.

Let's look at several other texts which have led believers, through the centuries, to this same conclusion. Does the work of the ministry among the saints really necessitate forming small support groups? Isn't that more or less a luxury for the super-spiritual? Turn with me to Hebrews 3:12-14. Most readers of Hebrews do not stop to ponder what, according to this text, is at stake when believers gather to nurture each other's faith.

Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be

hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ (or: have become sharers in Christ) if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

It happens in churches, (it has happened in ours), that a person is deceived by the attractiveness of sin and becomes hardened toward things of the Spirit, and falls away from the living God. Now I believe in eternal security; that is, I believe that everyone who is born of God and has the renewing Spirit of God within will finally be saved. But I also believe, on the basis of verse 14, that only those will be saved who hold their first confidence firm to the end. That is, in order to be saved, you must persevere in faith. Therefore, we may be sure of two things: one, if someone forsakes Christ, he was never truly born of God (1 John 2:19); and two, if someone is truly born of God, he will not forsake Christ, but will fight the fight of faith successfully to the end.

You can tell whether someone has learned his doctrine of eternal security from the Bible or not by whether he thinks the doctrine makes warnings and exhortations superfluous. If he says: "I am secure from falling; therefore, you need not warn me of the danger of falling or exhort me to hold firm to the end," then you know he has not learned his doctrine from the Bible. But if he says, "I am confident that the Lord will continue to preserve me for himself, but I know that my heart is open to the deceitfulness of sin and that I will only hold my confidence firm to the end if I take heed to the warnings and exhortations of my brothers and sisters," then you know he has learned his doctrine from the Bible. Let us not be wiser than God. His way of keeping his sheep secure is through regular warnings against sin and exhortations to trust Christ.

That has tremendous implications for the way I preach, but notice it does not say, "Take care, pastors, to exhort your people daily." It says, "Take care, brothers, ... exhort one another every day." Christ gives pastors to the church, pastors equip the saints for ministry, and you, the saints, minister to each other; that is, you exhort one another every day and thus become God's instruments for the preservation of each other's faith. Eternal security is a community project. You are responsible (and this is a weighty statement) for the perseverance of your brothers and sisters.

Now how is that ministry going to happen among the saints at Bethlehem? We believe that without the emergence of many smaller support groups we run the risk of this ministry not happening in our church. The kind of pointed exhortation and encouragement and warning which is suited to our need can't be given or received on the run. And it's not enough to have it given from the pulpit. We need people who know us and feel our particular need, so that their word of exhortation is intimate and shaped to our special crisis of faith. And you can't know people significantly if you only see them in church a couple of hours a week. Therefore, we believe it is essential that all of us seek the kind of regular smaller togetherness where the ministry of the saints is free to happen.

When the saints do the work of the ministry, the goal is not only to encourage strong, persevering faith, but also to stir each other up to love and good works. In Hebrews 10:24,25 the writer exhorts us like this:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Notice, again, it does not say, "Meet together so the pastor can stir you up to love and good works, and encourage you." It says, "Consider how to stir up each other ... encourage one another." When we have asked: what forms of togetherness will allow the saints of Bethlehem to fulfill this ministry, the repeated answer has been: the emergence of many small support groups. History has shown that God's way of stirring up his people to great acts of love and mission has often been to draw together a small praying

band who lay themselves open to him and get a vision for service. Where will the new works of mission and charity come from in our church, if not from holy brain-storming in small groups of zealous people?

Not only does vision for love get stirred up by such fellowship, but also strength to see it through to reality. Love and good works are not easy to sustain over the long haul. There has to be much lifting up of the downcast. As Ecclesiastes 4:9,10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up." The Christian life is to be a life of love and good works flowing from a joyful faith in God's promises. But there are innumerable obstacles to love and threats to faith. We sink down, or fall down, or get knocked down again and again, and it is not God's revealed pattern for us to have to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps in isolation. On the contrary, God's command, and gracious provision, is: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). It is a sweet law in the Savior's kingdom that no one, married or single, male or female, young or old, carry a crushing burden alone. Yet it is happening because we are a big church without sufficient forms of small togetherness. In order to obey the law of Christ we have to build close, trusting relationships. Otherwise, you don't even know what the burdens are, let alone have occasion to share their weight. And we believe that to build those relationships we must form small, regular gatherings of believers.

One of the burdens of life that we should not try to bear alone, which often makes us physically ill, and which hinders love and good works is hidden sin. Therefore, Jesus commands us: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). In what sort of setting can we be free to confess our sins to each other? The answer is surely in a small group of believers who have won our trust, who know us and love us, and have committed themselves to care for us. And what about praying for each other? The bigger the group the more impersonal the prayers will be. Yet the greatest needs are often the most personal. Shall we then pray for each other alone at home? If we only do that, something very precious and very powerful will be missing. For Jesus said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19,20). Do we need any further incentive to gather in a small group for the upbuilding of our faith, the stirring up of love to the glory of our Lord's name, than this: He will be there! And I assume that would be a pointless observation if it did not mean that he would be there more obviously and more powerfully than if we were to remain alone. Is it any wonder that Jesus sent out his disciples two by two (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1) and that Paul always traveled with his Barnabas or Silas or Timothy or Luke, and that even within the twelve Jesus built that deep core of affection with Peter, James and John?

In summary, the Biblical basis for developing smaller forms of togetherness in our church is that God intends you, the saints, to do the work of the ministry as you are equipped and encouraged by the pastor-teachers. The aim of this ministry is to build up each other's faith and love. God's design is to use human support and exhortation to sustain the faith of his children and to lighten the burdens which they bear in the service of love. That kind of mutually caring ministry does not happen in big groups between casual acquaintances. Therefore, to fulfill our calling we must see the emergence of many smaller support groups among our numbers.

Now let me conclude with some practical suggestions and examples. Our aim is to be as flexible as possible in the encouragement of this ministry. There is not one kind or size or frequency or format or group that will fit everyone's needs. We are happy to let the Word and Spirit of God go to work on you to produce many different forms of small togetherness. For example, I can see several housewives meeting

each week for lunch and prayer. I can see three or four business men meeting for breakfast and prayer. I can see a group of high schoolers getting together to talk over problems of being Christian in school and praying for each other. I can see two or three couples and some singles meeting in the evening every week or two to read a pertinent book together, talk of mutual concerns and pray.

When I was in seminary I was in four very valuable groups. The men of our Sunday School class met one morning a week at Jim Keener's apartment for half an hour. It was devoted almost entirely to prayer for things that would be happening that day or week. Then for one semester five or six of us students met with our professor, Dr. Fuller, in his office just to pray for him and for each other. Then my senior year Marcia Sayer and Brian Reed and I met early in the morning once a week in an empty classroom to talk about the uncertainties of our future after school and to pray specifically for God's guidance in the coming months. And finally, several of us seminarians had the privilege of meeting for several months with our pastor, Ray Ortlund. Those were precious times and ten years later we still communicate with people from those groups. And I've never lost my longing for deep substantial relationships.

So now today I am in three groups again, all quite different. I meet with the entire church staff for lunch, sharing in the Word, discussion of ministry and prayer each Wednesday. I meet with the interns every other week for an hour-and-a-half to share their burdens of ministry, to study and to pray for each other. Then finally I meet for an hour-and-a-half with Glenn to talk over how things are going and to pray for the church together. When any of these groups lapse, I miss it very much. None of those people realizes how much they mean to me. I cherish the thought that I am building relationships now that will last all my life, no matter what.

One other illustration which fell into my lap like a Godsend this week, wholly unplanned. And may this spur us all on to do likewise. My wife, Noel, and Mavis, Glenn's wife, and June, Bruce's wife, plan to begin meeting together every other week for discussion and prayer. I know Bruce and Glenn share my joy at having a wife who places a high priority on the ministry of prayer and spiritual fellowship. I know we'll be the richer for it.

What I desire for you all this morning is that the Lord might put the resolve in your hearts to pray for his leadership in forming a support group. May this be the beginning of an upsurge of ministry and life among the saints at Bethlehem.

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