



Part One in the series: *"Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church"*

Bible Study and Fellowship Group versus Church

Bible Study and Fellowship Model	Biblical Church Model
1 We define ourselves as a Bible Study or Fellowship Gathering	We define ourselves as a Church local and in the broader body of Christ
2 Location of the study is Local perhaps in a Home, or other comfortable location never biblically referred to as being in the heavenlies	Location of the Church is first In the Heavenlies The Jerusalem which is above Heavenly Zion Only Secondarily on earth
3 Meets in a house to study about God	Is God's house
4 Friends gathering	Bride of Christ in formation
5 Students Connection based more on bible study desires	Family Connection based more on being a family in Christ
6 Focus on learning about the Bible and God	Focus on becoming Disciples of Christ
7 Knowing the Bible with some emphasis on discipleship	Being Equipped as disciples for the work of ministry with some emphasis on knowing the Bible
8 Passive Spectating is acceptable though often not normative	Active Participation is strongly encouraged and very normative
9 Human Teacher focus with reliance on the Spirit to edify	Headship of Christ focus with reliance on the Spirit for connection to Him
10 Teacher teaches as led by the Spirit	Body shares as led by the Spirit
11 In Human Leadership the focus is on a Teacher	In Human Leadership the focus is on Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, and Elders who Teach, Exhort, Encourage, Rebuke, Admonish, and Oversee
12 No emphasis on Church Structure Structure is limited to principals of successful discussion and biblical study	Clear biblical patterns of Church Structure Structure extends to all aspects of a biblical description of Church
13 Gathering for fellowship, or to Study a biblical text, subject, or doctrine of the Bible forms the primary definition of the gathering	Gathering to draw near to Christ directly and in one another, with or without direct reference to a biblical passage defines the gathering
14 Primary Responsibility is to be interested in Learning biblical truths, though growth in Christ will be the outcome	Primary Responsibility is to be interested in Sharing and Growing in the life of Christ, though learning biblical truths will take place too
15 Attendance initially based on interest in a biblical study or topic in a relational environment	Attendance based on Commitment to knowing Christ in one another and gathering as His Church
16 Low Emphasis on Shared Life Community though it will develop of its own	High Emphasis on Shared Life Community with clear priorities on this happening
17 Commitment to Christ in one another is more narrowly defined in connection with bible study and fellowship and doesn't necessitate community	Commitment to Christ in one another extends to broad involvement in all aspects of life and involves strong community
18 A greater degree of personal Independence because it's primary goal is to be a bible study or fellowship group, not a Church	A greater degree of Interdependence because it's primary goal is to be a Church in shared life community
19 Accountability more narrowly defined to the manner in which they manage themselves in the study, though broader accountability may develop	Accountability extends broadly to the entire body, in terms of living a life before God and the Church which glorifies Him and encourages the body
20 Discipline limited to removal if a student is hindering the flow of study. Teacher free to make this decision.	Discipline broad, based on the full range of issues of sin that could necessitate the discipline or even removal of a member. Entire body must make this decision corporately.
21 One may be involved in several bible studies simultaneously	At any given time, biblically one is only called to one local Church family at a time

Interpretation of the Chart

For those beginning to gather, as the Church, in a home setting - especially if they have been familiar with gathering in a traditional Church setting, it is all too common to hear them describe the home gathering as "A bible study" (We're going to a bible study at so and so's home today...), or a "fellowship gathering" (We're just going to spend time with other Christians we enjoy hanging out with). Are these the biblical definitions for Church? Do these encompass and sufficiently honor what was in the heart of Christ and the apostles in forming the Church? Were they envisioning bible studies and fellowship groups or something far more than this?

I like what Frank Viola has to say on this matter: *"As to their meetings, they are not a Bible study, a prayer meeting, a songfest, nor a supperfest, but something different. Namely, the church meets to reveal and display Jesus Christ together out of a real, experiential, life-giving encounter with the Lord. And everyone is functioning on equal footing. No one is dominating. And few, if any, are passive."* In another location he writes: *"Incidentally, when a group of Christians meets once a week for a Bible study, songfest, or supperfest, they will experience minimal problems. But when they live in authentic community, the problems are endless."*

I believe they had in mind far more of a "Bonded Covenantal Shared Life Community" than either bible study or fellowship group typically embraces in meaning. The level of commitment to one another (as opposed to commitments to Church attendance emphasized in the traditional Church), to knowing Christ in one another, to sharing the gifts and graces of the Spirit, to growing up into Christ, and being equipped for the work of the ministry, is far more at the heart of the New Testament Church than a bible study or fellowship group encompasses.

Please don't misunderstand me on this matter, I have absolutely nothing against bible studies, and I do know that there is a great deal of overlap between the two, but there are critical differences between them. I have traveled all over the world, and I have been in a lot of places where people referred to what they were doing as "House Church," when in reality it was little more than a bible study. I believe there is a great need for clarity on this subject because of the mass confusion that exists here.

If Jesus is to have the Church He bled and died for, and we are to experience what was in His heart when He birthed the New Testament Church, then we are going to need great clarity on this subject, knowing what the Church is, and what it isn't is not a small issue, and confusing it with other small gatherings doesn't help. Church is more than just a small gathering of believers...much more! This article is only one of many on our web site, where we discuss these differences, so don't expect this one article to give you the entire picture, but the part of the picture it gives you is an important one.

1. While there are certainly overlapping elements of similarity between a bible study fellowship and a Church, there are strong differences that matter a great deal. There is no indication the primary purpose of gathering the saints in the New Testament was for bible study per se. The emphasis was on knowing Christ Himself and specifically knowing Him in and through the other gathered believers. It is certainly true that to one degree or another this will take place in a bible study fellowship, it is equally true that this is less of the up front offer of this group, and is the primary hope and focus of the Church.
2. The Church is described in ways that a simple bible study is not. A bible study is not biblically described in transcendent and eternal ways, whereas the New Testament is filled with such transcendence of description of the Church.
3. A bible study does not adequately fit the description of "The House of God which we are," in Hebrews 3:6. A bible study can be a wonderful thing, but the House of God is sooo much more than just a bible study.
4. While a bible study will contribute to the development of the Bride of Christ in the lives of those who meet, the express purpose of the Church is to focus on equipping the bride to be the bride she is.
5. A bible study connects at the primary purpose of becoming a more informed bible student. A Church connects at a far deeper and more relational connection of experiencing and living out their connection as brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, sons, daughters, and being a family. It is not that those who attend a bible study aren't brethren with a sense of being brethren, but it is one thing to "attend" a bible study, and something very different to "be" a family.
6. Bible study attendance focuses more on learning about God and His Word, while a Church takes that merely as a launching point to build strong discipleship in the lives of those who gather. Discipleship may or may not be the focus of a bible study, but a Church will intensely encourage such discipleship.
7. It is a great thing to want to know the bible, but it is significantly different to view gathering and community as connected to the concept of being equipped for the work of ministry. While it is true that those who gain solid biblical foundations should be better equipped for ministry, equipping for ministry stretches far beyond simply having advanced bible knowledge. Equipping the saints is far more at the heart of true leadership and Church life than is necessitated of a bible study or fellowship group. Being equipped for life and ministry is at the heart of what a Church is all about. This equipping spans every aspect of life and ministry, and those called to lead in a Church environment must be specialists in such equipping. This would not necessarily need to be the case for a bible teacher.
8. One may come in to a bible study, bring their bible, and sit quietly and listen, and no one will necessarily urge them to interact, and certainly not at a 1 Corinthians 14 level, whereas a gathering of the Church strongly encourages things that wouldn't necessarily characterize a bible study, such as the sharing of revelation, tongues, interpretation of tongues, hymns, prophecy, or spiritual instruction directly from God. Those attending a bible study inherently know that such behavior is more "Church" oriented than is usual for a bible study.
9. While a bible study will certainly seek to have the Holy Spirit's guidance and assistance in the study and understanding of the scripture, a Church far more intensely seeks to come into complete alignment with the headship

of Christ. His direct and clear leadership is all the more important in the gathering of the Church, than in a simple bible study. For a Church to function under His headship is to be fully committed to following His lead, whether that results in the bible ever being opened up in a gathering, up to an intense Spirit led revelation of biblical insights.

10. While in the context of a bible study it is common to allow those attending to share insights from scripture and ask questions, it is more or less optional to do so. In the context of the gathered Church, since Paul teaches his Churches to dynamically connect to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to release the manifestations of His heart and mind in the fellowship, gathered Church is far more focused on that happening through each gathered member than would be encouraged in the typical bible study. It is not to be forced, but it is clearly to be encouraged, supported, and trained in.
11. Bible studies are overseen by Bible Teachers. Churches are overseen by Elders. Bible teachers are not necessarily elders, and elders are not necessarily bible teachers. The roles of leadership are significantly different between the two. The role of a bible teacher is to love God, love people, be knowledgeable of God's word, be able to teach it accurately and interestingly, and manage a good discussion. The role of an elder is certainly to love God and love people, and be knowledgeable of the bible, but their similarity to the bible teacher ends there, and branches out into other specialities, having more to do with care, protection, spiritual insight and guidance for the flock, spiritual wisdom, spiritual grace, and prophetic insight for God's plan for the local gathering as well as His work in the Church worldwide. These differences in calling are very significant to the life of the Church.
12. One of the goals of bible study is not the development of Church structure. It's focus is to study scripture and increase understanding of various biblical passages. The goals of a Church are different in that it does work towards a clear biblical definition and function of the various elements of structure, which include principles for gathering, leadership, giving, caring, in-reach, out-reach, worship, praise, prayer, breaking bread, spiritual participation and moving in the Spirit, etc.
13. It would be an odd bible study to make no reference to any biblical passages, but while it might not be usual for the gathered Church to not directly reference scripture it is also possible that the Holy Spirit would feel no necessity of doing so, and might simply release spiritual insight among those gathered apart from any direct reference to scripture. The goal of bible study is more focused on learning the bible. The goal of the gathered Church is more focused on sharing the life of Christ and His life being formed in each member. Bible study focuses on knowing scripture. Church focuses on knowing Christ. Certainly there is overlap here, but their goals are not necessarily equivalent.
14. This difference, while it isn't a necessary difference between a bible study and a Church, is more easily a difference due to the nature of bible study. It's focus is clearly on knowing the bible, whereas a Church must never allow itself to primarily focus its attention on knowing the bible, and must focus its goals on knowing Christ, and knowing in Him in the bible, life, and in one another. Church is inherently a far more Christ centered emphasis than is required of a bible study.
15. Generally the drawing card for a bible study is the stated purpose of knowing the bible better. It branches out into relationship development and personal spiritual growth, but its stated up front goal is to know the bible better. The Church's drawing card is a bit different. While knowing the bible will certainly factor in, knowing Christ is far more the goal, and knowing Him and through the other members, not only in the context of the gathering but beyond the specific meeting into many other relational contexts. The Church seeks to connect the lives of its members at many and varied levels, and without such connections it only remotely resembles a New Testament Church. The formal meeting is only the starting point of Church life. A bible study will typically begin and end with the bible study meeting, with no implied value on additional weekly interaction between its attenders.
16. This points adds to point #14, in terms of emphasis. It is clearly to be the emphasis of the gathered Church to become deeply involved in the lives of those who gather, whereas this is not the stated or implied vision of a bible study. It may happen in a bible study, but its value system is not innately connected such happening. For the Church to be as it was envisioned by Christ and the apostles community must take place. All of the "one anothers" of scripture are only realized as the members take up their call to deeply connect to the lives of one another. So often this is the great flaw of the traditional Church, and defines the traditional Church as "meeting oriented," rather than "community oriented." Even a casual look at the New Testament reveals the community emphasis - shared meals, shared giftings, shared prayer, shared care and concern for the members, shared finances, shared time both in the meeting and beyond the meeting, familial terms such as brother, sister, etc. While it is optional to deeply know the lives of those who gather for a bible study, it is not as optional for the lives of those who gather in the localized expression of a Church. It is at this point that both the bible study and traditional Church fail the test of New Testament Church, and the smaller fellowship can and must shine.
17. A Church simply must become strong in its community. To remain shallow is miss its potential and to define it as something other than what Jesus and the apostles had in mind. We are called to know one another, and to be involved both in and outside the meetings. To some degree this demands a small enough environment for the encouragement and cultivation of deep relationships. To walk into a congregation of 100 to 10000 people is overwhelming to this call of relational community. Each person inherently knows it is impossible for it to happen at any kind of deep level with so many people. It thereby encourages a drawing inward rather than outward, simply by being overwhelmed with the challenge of connecting to so many. Therefore, in contrast to the large gatherings of the modern Church, the early Church specifically favored smaller gatherings of the size that would easily fit in a home, rather than build Church buildings, and thus encouraged a familial type of relationship development with a reasonable number of people for the amount of time people have to connect outside of their own personal lives of nuclear family, business, and recreation.
18. This issue of "Independence," versus "Interdependence," it is a very important difference. Those who attend a bible study inherently know that they are free to come and go, to know one another deeply or not know one another deeply. They are less inclined to deeply search the Spirit for regular attendance, regular connections to the other members, deeply sharing the totality of their lives with the others. These are just not to be so for a Church. While nothing of

rigid mandate for gathering should ever be imposed on the members, nevertheless there should be a far stronger compelling to seek the mind of Christ about gathering and weekly connections with the body because of the nature of what a Church is. We need the Christ that is in one another. There are things that happen spiritually in our lives "together" that simply don't happen as deeply or effectively when we have a casual or hap hazard attitude about strong and regular connections with the body we gather with. Thus interdependency should develop. We do actually need the Christ in one another. It is truly not optional. This is not necessarily so with a bible study mindset.

19. Accountability looks quite different between these two approaches. Whereas personal accountability is primarily connected to the manner in which the student handles themself within the context of the bible study, personal accountability in the Church extends to both behavior in the gathering as well as the manner in which they conduct their lives outside the gathering. Accountability is not hierarchical in nature, but is horizontal to the body and vertical towards agreement and harmony with the Spirit. Unity is defined as agreement with the Spirit of God, resulting in His peace extending throughout. Unity in the midst of diversity may prevail for a season, but full agreement in all areas is sought with the Spirit. Unity in a bible study could far more lean towards agreement to disagree agreeably with no compelling need to arrive at full agreement with the Spirit in all areas of life.
20. Discipline in a bible study would look very different from discipline in a Church. A bible study would exercise control only to the degree that an individual was disrupting the actual study. Discipline in the Church would look at the entire life of each member and hold them to higher standard of behavior in all areas of their lives. In a bible study the teacher may have to ask a student to stop a certain behavior or not return, but in a Church such decisions would extend way beyond just behavior in the gathering and must not be carried out by a leader alone but must include the entire congregation.
21. For those who equate bible studies with Churches, there is a failure to recognize that no where in the New Testament do we see Paul, or any of the other apostles, considering any individual being a viable member of more than one local Church at a time, though there would certainly be nothing wrong with being involved in several bible studies at one time, in different places, and with different groups of people. There are many reasons, beyond the scope of what I can address here, for why this is so, but it is a very important distinction.