

Church in the Everyday: Gospel Communities on Mission

Making Disciples in the Everyday: Living the Great Commission, week #4

The GCM Collective

My exposure to a lot of what we've been talking about for the past three weeks has come through an organization called GCM Collective, a ministry which exists to promote, create and equip gospel communities on mission (GCM). They define a gospel community as: a group of believers that lives out the mission of God together as family, in a specific area to a particular people group, by declaring and demonstrating the gospel in tangible forms, with a vision to see one Gospel Community on Mission per 1000 people in every city or region that God allows them to help serve in.

What we'd like to share with you tonight are the core values or distinctives of a GCM, as defined by the GCM Collective, because these principles are really the practical outworking of what we have seen over the past three weeks, and specifically what we saw last week about the church's identity. Everything that I have shared with you over the past three Sunday nights has been to help you see that the idea of GCM's (or "missional community") is not a fad, it's not "the next new thing" to hit the evangelical church, but that it's rooted in the Story of God, the gospel, and the identity of the church since Jesus gave the Great Commission. This is what the church has always been called to.

GCM's or Life Groups?

We saw last week that in giving the Great Commission, Jesus was calling His first disciples to immerse people in their new gospel identity: *in the name of* the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And as we worked through what that means, we arrived at a definition of the

church as a family of missionary servants, saved by God's grace and sent as disciples to make disciples, for the praise of God's glory.

The reason why the vision of GCM Collective has been so compelling to me is that I don't see another way we can be and do what Jesus has called us to apart from something like a GCM. You can't be a family of missionary servants and be discipled and make disciples among a group of 250+ people gathering once a week, or once mid-week. These identities, and the life of love and obedience to all Jesus has commanded that flows from them, can only get worked out in all the stuff of ordinary, everyday life. And for years we've had a structure like this in place, which we have called Life Groups.

So as we move towards the "doing" side of this series, we want to talk more about the place of Life Groups in the mission of disciple-making, though I'm mindful that Life Group might not be the ideal term, because what GCM has in mind is something like a Life Group, but maybe not exactly what you're thinking when you hear or use the term Life Group.

If the name of something indicates identity (Adam, Eve, etc.), what does the name "Life Group" indicate about what it is?

In light of last week's talk about identity, what is missing from this definition?

So as we talk about this structure tonight, rather than use the term Life Group, we're going to use the term Gospel Community on Mission. That might sound cumbersome, and I'm not advocating a name-change per se, but as we think about these groups being the primary way we experience what it means to be the church living out Jesus' mission in the everyday, it's worth considering whether our name truly represents what we are.

Distinctives of a Gospel Community on Mission

GCM is grounded in the conviction that gospel communities on mission are the primary organizing structure of the church. To say that GCM's are the primary organizing structure of JCF would mean that the primary way we experience what it means to be the Church is through a GCM. They are the primary way we would organize ourselves for carrying out the mission of Jesus, which is to be discipled and to make disciples (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

Below are eight characteristics that what we aspire to as we knit ourselves to one another as gospel communities on mission, for the purpose of making disciple-making disciples of the Lord Jesus (notice that we are really trying to drive the disciple-making component home here, as too often "small groups" have been conceived of and functioned without a whole lot of thought to the mission of making disciples who make disciples).

And as we go through these, we'll pause at times to specifically draw attention to how this vision of GCM's might be a little different from the way we have viewed Life Groups in the past.

1. The gospel is central to everything (1 Corinthians 15:1-2, Colossians 1:6)

The gospel is not simply the means by which we are converted—it is the good news of redemption through Jesus Christ that reconciles us to God and adopts us into his family. It transforms our hearts, shapes our ethics, pastors our souls and changes our behavior. It creates the Christian community and defines its purpose. The gospel is the word we speak to bring unbelievers to faith and to bring believers to maturity. The Christian community is created by the gospel for the gospel.

Application: *How regularly are people in your gospel community speaking the truth in love (ie, the gospel) to one another when others face pastoral issues?*

2. Community is a powerful apologetic of the gospel (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23)

Because the Christian community is created by the gospel it is the place where the gospel can be seen and understood. The reign of God is a reign of life, justice, peace, blessing and freedom. But the good news that God is king is not heard as good news by a world that has chosen self-rule. The people of God therefore are to so live under the reign of God that the world sees that God is good and his reign is good news. We explain and commend the gospel through our lives and especially through our life together in Christian community.

Application: *How regularly are not-yet believers involved in the life of your gospel community?*

This understanding of a GCM may differ from the way you have thought of a Life Group, in that the GCM isn't primarily a "small group". Now it still will technically be a "small group" (8-15 people or so), but Life Groups at Joy -- as with most churches who have adopted the structure over the past 20 years -- have mainly been for the purpose of bringing relational connectivity into a church context where the Sunday gathering was too large for that to happen. The focus of a "small group" is those people in the church.

In other words, small groups tend to be viewed as a supplement to "real church", which is Sunday morning. They were seen as a way to "close the backdoor of the church", not as the primary way of saturating a region with disciples of Jesus. But a GCM has a fundamental conviction that the life of this community is an important aspect of our missionary mandate; it's not just a way to connect believers, but a way to demonstrate to the world the glory of our great God, and the goodness of His reign in our lives.

3. Community is missional and mission is communal (Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:9-12)

The Christian community is created by the gospel for the gospel. So its defining purpose is to glorify Christ by proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel to a needy world. Christian community cannot be introspective. It is always seeking to bless its neighborhood and proclaim Christ to a lost world. Because the Christian community is an apologetic of the gospel, mission should normally not be a lone activity. Wherever possible we want to do mission together and introduce unbelievers to the Christian community.

Application: *How committed is your gospel community to identifying and meeting tangible needs in your neighborhoods/communities?*

While this might not be a huge temptation at JCF right now, it's important to clarify that this distinctive, rightly understood, does not lead to viewing the group as primarily a social activist group. Again, this might not be a big threat at JCF, but in a lot of contexts, the word "missional" is becoming synonymous with social activism, or social justice.

When I lived in the city, I would interact with people often (usually who lived outside of the city) who would say their group's mission was to serve the homeless or poor in Philadelphia. I would ask them if they are planning on moving into the city to make disciples of the homeless and poor? Listen, feeding the homeless and serving the poor is a great, and biblical thing to do but that's not who you are making disciples of. You are making disciples of the people you are driving in with to go serve.

Cleaning up the park would be a great display of restoration but if it's not anchored in making disciples of Jesus, it's not the mission. As the distinctive, and 1 Peter 2, make clear, missional living is about demonstrating *and* proclaiming the gospel to a needy world. One without the other is not faithful missionary living.

4. We share our lives as extended family (Colossians 3:12-17, 1 Corinthians 12)

The church is the community created by the gospel, so Christians are not individuals who gather for meetings, but members of God's family. Our identity in Christ creates a communal identity. We make decisions with regard to the implications for the church, and we make significant decisions in consultation with the church. We ~~should~~ (get to) share our lives together as a family. We spend time with one another, care for one another, exhort one another with the gospel, pray with one another and take the initiative to resolve conflict, all the time inviting unbelievers to participate in this common life. In a broken world we offer a place of belonging. Church life is family life.

Application: *How often are the members of your gospel community seeing/interacting with one another between scheduled meetings?*

This point makes clear that, contrary to the way a Life Group has sometimes been conceived/functioned, a GCM is not primarily an affinity group, that is, a bunch of people who are knit together because of a common interest or stage in life (young marrieds, college and career, etc.). Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, "You don't have true community unless there's someone in your community that you wish wasn't".

That's the way family life is...we don't get to pick our family members. And part of what makes a GCM so compelling to the world is that it's a mixture of people whom you would otherwise never see together ("Christians" used in Antioch). And a big part of our discipleship is learning how to love people who are very different than you in stage of life, personality, temperament, etc. It's not difficult to gather a group of people just like you and get along with them, but what kind of picture of the gospel does that present to the world? But when very different people find ways to love each other like family, we are revealing a wonderful picture of the gospel's power to unite and transform.

5. All believers exercise gospel ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16, Romans 15:14)

Mission should be communal. Gospel ministry is not the privilege of a professional elite or people in full-time ministry. It belongs to all God's people. We are all given the privilege and responsibility of mission. We are all missionaries. We are not all called to be the same—our different gifts and personalities complement one another as we share together in the exciting privilege of mission. We need one another. The role of leaders is not to do gospel ministry on behalf of others, but to prepare God's people for gospel ministry.

Application: *Do the members of your gospel community see themselves as full-time paid gospel workers...regardless of who is issuing their paycheck?*

Do they see their involvement in the workplace, business, art, public service, as a part of their missionary calling?

6. Discipleship, shepherding and leadership development happens in community on mission (Matthew 15:21-28, 20:20-28)

The Christian community is the primary, God-given context for pastoral care and leadership development. In the Christian community the gospel not only informs the head, but also transforms the heart. The gospel is not only learned, but its implications are lived out in everyday life. We learn about gospel ministry by doing gospel ministry. The idols of our hearts are revealed not in a therapist's office, nor in a classroom, but in the context of shared lives. And in the context of a shared life we daily apply the gospel to one another's hearts and lives.

Application: *Is conflict in your gospel community open rather than suppressed, and is reconciliation regularly and swiftly being pursued?*

How regularly are people in your gospel community repenting of sinful attitudes like anxiety, pride, complaining, fear of others, selfishness, bitterness, etc.?

This pushes on the idea that a GCM is not primarily a support group. That is, a group where people show up each week and talk about what's going on in their lives, share a burden that's weighing on them, then we pray and repeat the whole thing week after week. Praying for one another's needs is a great thing, but I bet many of you have been in groups where the same people tend to share the same things, and the same prayers get prayed, but very little actual gospel ministry takes place. We nod politely and say, "Aw, it's ok, I'm sorry," but we don't disciple one another's hearts in the midst of real life.

The members of a GCM will support one another, but it will be in the context of sharing life together on Jesus' mission. Living life on mission together is not always easy because you're doing it with other people who, like me and you, sin. You're rubbing up against each other and your sin will be exposed. You're not always going to be liked, not everyone is going to be on your program. You may cause pain and hurt in each other's lives. That happens. And praise God because it's a great opportunity to bring the gospel to bear on your life. The Goal in a GCM isn't just "support", but transformation into the image of Jesus, beginning with us and moving out to not-yet believers.

This leads right into #7...

7. The goal of teaching and preaching is gospel transformation that equips for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12, Colossians 1:28 & 3:16)

Good Bible teaching and preaching should capture and recapture our affections for Christ. Our goal is not simply to have good Bible teaching, but for the Bible to shape people's hearts and lives. We want to be doers of the word as well as hearers of the word. The frontline of

gospel ministry is not a sermon when the church gathers; it is the lives and words of the people of God throughout the week. Bible teaching, when the church gathers together, is vital to the health and vitality of the church, but it is vital because it inflames genuine worship and prepares God's people for frontline gospel ministry throughout the week. This is to be the goal and measure of our teaching and preaching.

Application: *Is there evidence that God's Word is changing the lives of the individuals in your gospel community, and the life of the community as a whole?*

It may be dangerous to say, but this point helps us to grasp that a GCM isn't primarily a Bible study. It's dangerous, because the Word of God has to be central in the life of the church, and a gospel community on mission will most certainly study the Bible together. But my experience is that sometimes Bible study is seen as the whole goal or point of the group, as if we feel better about ourselves as Christians if we're in a deep study of the Bible. It's like we feel that there's not even a reason to gather together if we're not studying something. And I love to study the Bible, but I've been in a number of Bible studies where we dig into the Word in great detail but never get to how the Word is actually intended to change us. It's justification by Bible knowledge, and it's dangerous.

A gospel community on mission isn't *primarily* a Bible study, meaning that studying the Bible is not the mission. We read the Bible so that we can know Him more, love Him more, surrender our lives more fully to Him and join Him in His mission. In other words, we will study the Bible, so that we can be faithful to the mission. How much of the Bible do we know, yet aren't living in obedience to? Do we really need to study more of it, so we can be more negligent of living how it calls us to live? Rather than study the Bible because it's what we're supposed to

do, we can study it as needs in the community or mission call for knowledge and growth in a particular area (eg, apologetics).

8. An Expectation of Multiplication (Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Timothy 2:2, Acts 11:18ff, 13:1-3)

It's woven into the very fabric of creation that healthy things reproduce. Biologically, the reason we age is that cells slow down in reproducing and eventually stop reproducing, which leads to deterioration and decay of the body. It was Jesus' plan from the beginning that His disciples would be the foundation for the multiplication of disciples of Jesus around the world. One biblical metaphor for discipleship is that of spiritual parenthood (1 Corinthians 4:15), and it would be a very odd parent who didn't have a vision for their kids to grow up, move out of the house and start new families. So the goal of multiplication should be the stated and expected goal from the beginning.

Application: *Does your gospel community have a vision to start a new gospel community in the next twelve months, and in time, a new congregation?*

Processing Time

What are your thoughts as you hear these eight distinctives?

In your experience with LG's, where have you seen strengths and weaknesses?

What obstacles have you bumped into, or would you anticipate bumping into, in seeking to live this out?

Does this feel like a heavy yoke?

Moving from Additional to Intentional

While this has been implicit in everything that has been said tonight, one more thing needs to be stressed: when understood in view of these

distinctives, it's clear that a GCM is not primarily a weekly meeting. There's no way that a gospel community could embody these values connecting only once a week for a couple of hours, but it's so easy to slip into that language and/or practice. In fact, our words often reveal our true belief: "I can't meet you Wednesday night...I have Life Group," as if Life Group is the 2-hour meeting, not a people living as a family of missionary servants, saved by God's grace and sent as disciples who make disciples, for the praise of God's glory.

Some people want to define LG or GCM as a weekly meeting, because it helps them feel like "church" or "discipleship" is just a part of our lives, it's more controllable that way, so we can live the rest of our lives as we want to live it, and it doesn't have to push into the nooks and crannies of our everyday living. We have a compartmentalized view of what it means to follow Jesus, as if we can fit living for Jesus and His mission around our lives, instead of fitting our lives around His mission. We forget that the call to Jesus is a call to die! He's bought you with a price, and He owns you! Your whole life belongs to Him, 24/7, *everything* is submitted to His reign!

Some people might feel that way, but I am going to assume the best about you, and assume that maybe you're feeling that this all sounds great, "but...this sounds great, but I'm so busy, how could I ever fit this sort of life into my schedule? There's work, caring for the kids, soccer practice, home repairs, an aging parent to be cared for. How many hours per week can I really give to this GCM stuff?"

What I am learning over the past few years is that the key to increasingly (take some comfort in knowing this is a process) living our lives as a family of missionary servants is to move from seeing GCM as something additional that needs to be tacked onto your already-busy life, to seeing all the normal stuff of life that you are already doing as full of opportunity for living out the mission of making disciples.

It's about filling those normal rhythms of life with greater gospel intentionality. You only have one life to live, and Jesus doesn't want you living it in frustration and burnout, trying to add more stuff to your life. Remember, His yoke is easy and His burden is light! Burnout arises when I am trying to live my life, for me, and then fit God/Church into the available time that my life affords. That will crush you! But one life, where everything is God's, and the everyday rhythms of life get infused with gospel intentionality, that's an easy yoke.

This is the mentality that the GCM Collective is built on. ***GCM is built on the conviction of moving from an additional mindset to an intentional mindset.*** Ordinary life with gospel intentionality. Meals, work, trips to the grocery store or park, yard work, home maintenance, soccer games, PTA meetings. This is where you live, and this is where Jesus means for His mission to flourish. Not by adding more stuff, but by thinking differently about the stuff you're already doing.

We'll talk about what that looks like -- for pastoral care and mission -- the next two weeks.