

HOLY ACCOUNTABILITY
SMALL GROUPS AND SPIRITUAL PARTNERS
By Dr. Steve Daily

The story is told of a pastor who began every one of his sermons with the phrase, “The story is told.” No, not really, occasionally I do begin a sermon in some other way, but not very often, and not today. My son just told me that he was going to start a sermon with this line, so I decided that I better make fun of myself, before he makes fun of me. But, the story is told of an absent-minded professor who became so engrossed in a conversation with two of his colleagues at a train depot, that they didn’t notice the train was about to leave the station, until the conductor yelled, “All Aboard.” After hearing the announcement they all became so frazzled that the professor’s two absent-minded colleagues ran and jumped on the train without any luggage. The professor tried to gather his luggage, but couldn’t get it on the train before it pulled out of the station. As the professor stood there weeping, a stranger who had observed the incident came up to comfort him. He said, “don’t feel too sad my man, two out of three made it, and that’s a pretty good average.” You don’t understand, cried the professor, those two absent-minded colleagues came to see me off on my trip.

We all need to be accountable to someone, but it helps if the person we are accountable to, is somewhat accountable himself. After preaching on the importance of having a spiritual partner, a church member who was trying to become sober once told me that his spiritual partner tried to celebrate his first month of sobriety by offering to buy him a drink. This is generally not the kind of spiritual partner you want to pursue. When I think about what I’ve been through the last seven months I can honestly say that I don’t think I’d be here this morning had it not been for my spiritual partner. He has been like a solid rock that has provided support, stability, wisdom, strength and accountability. I always look forward to our time together because it is fun (we like to laugh), it is informative (we are always sharing insights from books, etc.), but most of all it is caring (How are you doing? How is your marriage? We love each other as brothers, truly care about each other, and realize that we need to be accountable to each other to be effectively growing in God’s grace.

One of the big problems in American culture, and particularly in American churches, is an immunity to community. Our culture has been built on the notion of independence and rugged individualism, and because we are more

wealthy and comfortable than any other culture, we can get away with being insulated and isolated from each other. One of the faithful attenders of my Sabbath School class often brings up how his Mormon relatives have proven again and again that their church members will come to the aid of a fellow church member in need, in a manner that is extremely rare in other churches. If they are broken down on the freeway they can just call through their church directory and numerous people will come to their aid. This doesn't happen in most other churches. And it has been pointed out that maybe there is a "works motivation" that is responsible for this in Mormon sub-culture. But, the bigger question is, "Why do so many people feel uncared for and isolated in the great majority of Christian churches?" The answer is because we are not following the Biblical model that God has given us. Spiritual partnerships and small groups are the fifth fruit on our kingdom tree and I want to make four crucial points about them this morning.

1. If it is not our determined intention to have a spiritual partner and to function in a Spirit-filled small group we are not living a Biblical lifestyle. The Bible doesn't use the term "spiritual partner," but it does tell us that we are to confess our sins to each other, and not just to God (James 5:16). This is to be done in the context of caring for each other and praying for each other. It is important to find a spiritual partner that we can trust, who is committed to the principle of confidentiality, who believes God's Word, and who prays with genuine faith. James calls this person a "righteous man" and the Bible promises healing where this pattern is followed. One reason that the twelve step program has been so effective in America is because the fifth step requires a spiritual partner to support the person seeking healing and to hold that person accountable. It is fine to try out being spiritual partners on a trial basis. It should just be understood that it takes time to ensure that such a relationship is a good fit for both people, and we should never feel pressure to make a particular spiritual partnership have to work.

When we are functioning in an effective spiritual partnership, it relieves the need to dominate a small group with our personal problems. This doesn't mean that we won't share some of our personal challenges with our small group, but it should mean that we won't be bringing up things in a small group setting that might be too personal or inappropriate. Sometimes church members ask me, "If I have a spiritual partner, do I still need to be in a small group?" My answer to this question is that Scripture calls us both to confess our sins to each other and to function in a church within the church small group that is patterned after the New Testament model. The Book of Acts

makes it clear that the first century church was made up of house churches and that the believers would meet together in larger groups in the temple courts, but would also meet as spiritual families in various homes. It was the house churches that provided a true sense of belonging, took care of the people's needs, provided individual accountability, and grew the church (Acts 2:46-47). The larger gatherings in the temple courts provided a greater sense of fellowship and the opportunity for the Apostles to teach and preach in a manner that produced extended community.

Here at Kingdom Life, it is our desire to follow the Biblical model as faithfully as we can. We do not want any of you who don't have spiritual partners or who don't belong to a small group to feel pressured or burdened to make such a change in your life, but we do want to be as helpful and faithful as we can to help you reach these goals in a manner that will be exciting and fulfilling for all who participate. Now that we have directories available I want to keep a record of who has spiritual partners, who belongs to a small group, and who doesn't, so that we can try and facilitate an increasing percentage of our congregation growing in these areas. I'm sure we are not at the point where we will share all our possessions in common like they did in the Book of Acts, but it is our goal to see the church, and business people within the church, develop a storehouse that can help to meet needs in small groups that are too great for the small group to meet itself.

And if you are simply opposed to the idea of spiritual partnerships and small groups and do not have a desire to participate in them, then I want you to let me know so that we can talk through this and pray through this together. I know a lot of Christians have been burned in small groups or even in spiritual partnerships, and are very reticent to make themselves vulnerable again. But, the Word of God makes it clear that none of us can afford to isolate ourselves from such relationships without making us even more vulnerable to the devil. Proverbs 18:1, says, "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire. He rages against all wise judgment" (NIV) Wisdom is found where people have a "multitude of counselors" (Proverbs 15:22). A humble, teachable spirit will lead to greater and greater wisdom (Proverbs 9:9) and ensure that we will be growing in God's grace rather than being frustrated by our own pride (James 4:6). If I am experiencing a lot of frustration in my life, I need to do a pride check – because He frustrates the proud. But, if I feel a waterfall of grace flowing over me each day, that is a good sign I'm living in humility and proper submission to God and others –

because He gives more grace to the humble.

2. A kingdom culture will be built on small groups and spiritual partnerships that place a priority on love and releasing God's supernatural power. We just noted that humility and grace go together and that they lead to wisdom, fellowship and unity. The same is true of love. Philippians 1:9-11 tells us that love leads to wisdom or discernment, it allows us to function in relationships free from offense, love covers offense, but a divisive spirit repeats offense (Proverbs 17:9 –NIV). Paul tells us that “knowledge puffs up” (1 Corinthians 8:1), but love leads to wisdom. Wisdom is found in relationship, not intellectual study. Where love, humility and wisdom come together, Paul says, we will be “free from offense.” It is easy to get offended in small groups when certain people talk too much or do not observe social graces. If our small groups are open and inclusive they will often include EGRs. EGR stands for extra grace required. The church is not a country club for saints, but a hospital for broken people. We all have our areas of brokenness, but some are more broken than others.

The more we find ourselves loving and caring for broken people the more we are like our Master, for Psalm 34:18 says, “The Lord is close to the broken hearted, and saves those with a crushed spirit.” It is the pursuit of love that leads to life, prosperity and honor (Proverbs 21:21-NIV), not the pursuit of these things themselves. God calls us to community and relationship with Himself and others. He does not call us to community for the sake of community, but community that is focused on faith in His supernatural power. This is true for small groups and spiritual partnerships. Unfortunately, the great majority of churches today, still focus totally on the natural realm and function in the natural mind. Even if they are promoting small groups, these groups are not functioning in the supernatural power of God. Back in the 1990s I was paid to do a study of the fastest growing churches in the world. One church that I studied up in Portland had more than 500 small groups, but these groups were all functioning in a humanistic manner. They built relationships and did good things, but they bore little resemblance to the house churches in the Book of Acts.

By contrast, when I traveled to South Korea and studied Paul Cho’s Full Gospel Church outside of Seoul, I was amazed at what I saw there. At the time they had more than 800,000 members and were the largest Christian church in the world. But, every single member of the church was required to

belong to a small group that varied in size between 10 and 20 people. Not only were each of these groups spiritual family to each other, they were all filled with faith in God's supernatural power that expressed itself in passionate prayer, worship, moving in the gifts including praying in tongues and seeing miracles manifesting in their group on a regular basis. They gathered in a weekly manner expecting to see God's supernatural power demonstrated in their midst. And the results mirrored the phenomenal growth of the New Testament church. Why? Because they followed the methods of the New Testament church.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 14:26, and see what typically happened when these house church members came together: "Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, a prophecy, a teaching, a tongue, a revelation or an interpretation, let all things be done for edification." The focus of the early church was receiving God's supernatural power and using it to change the world. That is to be our focus today as well. I know some of you have read Kevin Dedmon's excellent book, *Unlocking Heaven*, because I understand that Tom and Carolyn have been handing them out to many of you. But, this book is written by a pastor, and his wife, who served in ministry for many years without any supernatural works manifesting in their ministry. Yet, when they moved into the supernatural environment of Bethel Church and went through their supernatural school of ministry, all of this began to change. Today, they are on the staff of Bethel Church and this book is filled with supernatural testimonies that will thrill your soul. The point is, when we get into a supernatural environment, like a small group, where there is great expectation for God to move, our faith experience will grow to new & unprecedented heights. As John Wimber often said, "Faith is spelled RISK."

3. Small groups will ensure that the needs of all believers in the church are met and will place a priority on building unity in the church that prevents division.

In the last church where I pastored, I would often emphasize the importance of small groups in my sermons, but one of the problems we faced was a spirit of disunity. On one occasion, a prominent member of the church called a small group meeting in his home and after the people who were invited had eaten lunch he announced that the agenda for the meeting was to talk about the senior pastor in his absence. What are his strengths, what are his weaknesses, and can we do better? Some members who were highly offended by this approach left the meeting, and confronted the host, but others were drawn into his agenda. Now, I am the first to admit that I have more than my share of weaknesses, but this is not the way to build unity in a

church. I'm not aware of any house church in the New Testament that existed to grill and bar-B-Q the leaders of the church. But, Paul was very clear about what to do with *divisive* people in the church.

Turn with me to Titus 3:10-11 (NIV). Paul says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man [or woman] is warped and sinful; he [or she] is self-condemned." Those are pretty strong words. I was meeting with a senior pastor that I love and respect in our area, last week, who was telling me that he mentions these verses in his sermons on a regular basis. Because, it is human nature, sinful nature, to divide, criticize and condemn, this is the devil's greatest expertise. And small groups can provide a perfect opportunity for such behavior, for those who want to pursue such an agenda. That is why we need to make sure that our small groups follow the New Testament model of meeting people's needs, rather than planting poisonous seeds and producing poisonous weeds. I hope we have learned a lot from our previous church experience about how to avoid and reject a divisive spirit. I know the Lord is making it very clear to me that this is to be my number one priority here at Kingdom Life.

He wants us to build on the right foundation. A foundation that is free from unbiblical judgment, control, offense and division. He has made it clear to me that I am to be continually fishing for the COD (control, offense, division) fish, and to catch them before they can plant their eggs within our kingdom gates. I believe we are very close to coming into a full Biblical unity in this place that will launch us into the heavenlies, but this doesn't mean that the devil will simply give us a pass for the future, he is always out to undermine and divide any kingdom church that is fully open to God's leading and God's Spirit. So let me recommend three books that I believe are absolutely outstanding when it comes to preventing the spirit of division from entering our gates. The first two are quite short, but very powerful: *Judging: When? Why? How?* By Derek Prince; number two, *Needless Casualties of War: Biblical Spiritual Warfare*, by John Paul Jackson; and number three, *The Bait of Satan: Living Free from the Deadly Trap of Offense*. If we rightly understand the Word of God we will all be fishers of COD.

4. *Small groups & spiritual partnerships will focus on the gospel, the need for the baptism of the Holy Spirit & provide the main base for church testimonies.* The Bible lays down a simple formula for overcoming the devil, and it is

grounded in the gospel. Turn with me to Revelation 12:11, “They [God’s people] overcame him [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto death [they were fully abandoned to God]. As we have already noted, on our kingdom tree, knowing God through the gospel of the kingdom is foundational to everything else. The gospel is foundational because Jesus was the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. Every good thing that happens in this sinful world flows out of His shed blood. The more we enter into the covering of His blood and the power of His gospel the more we see our faith overcome every obstacle the devil can throw at us. This is why I am so excited about our Gospel of the Kingdom class that will start on the second Sabbath of August. One of the books we are going to be using in this class is Joseph Prince’s phenomenal book, *Destined to Reign*. If you haven’t read it I urge you to do so, even if you can’t take the class. In fact, this book would make a great small group study of its own.

Arlou, who gave our testimony this morning, recently read this book and it absolutely set her on fire. She was already hot for the kingdom, but now she is scalding. This book has strongly influenced her words of encouragement and dream interpretations on Thursday night during our street ministry. I have been thrilled to see how she has integrated the blood and the cross, the gospel of the kingdom, in everything she says, and how people have been moved by her words. When we get hold of the true gospel, the Holy Spirit gets hold of us, and takes us to new levels that we have never known before. That is why the true gospel naturally leads to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gives our small groups the power to grow and change lives. The best book I have read that recognizes this is entitled, *Holy Spirit Empowered Small Groups*, by John and Sonja Decker. The book is filled with how-to suggestions and miraculous testimonies that make it easy for anyone who wants to move out in faith to start a small group and see it release God’s power in your home, or here in the church, if you want to meet here. Again, I want to refer you to Larry Giacona, who oversees our small group ministry, and Bob Sachar, who oversees spiritual partnerships in the church, for any help you may need.

Let me just share what typically happens in the small groups described in this book. First they share testimonies of God’s miraculous answers to prayer, and prayer requests for present needs, then they pray for these requests focusing first on new people they have invited to the group who may not be Christians or who are new Christians. The priorities of the group

are leading people to Christ, leading people into the baptism of the Holy Spirit, learning to hear God's voice, giving words of encouragement and healing, healing the sick through revelation, and breaking demonic strongholds through faith-filled prayer. Faith is contagious. I loved last weekend because it was so filled with faith. Nasir Ikbol led out in a healing service Friday night that produced many miracles and which I wish all of you could have experienced. He reminded us that faith is an action word. It is different from hope or belief, it actually involves taking action, and that's what the people in Decker's book are doing.

That is what many of us did last Sabbath when we came forward in response to Pastor Joe's call. I love having a word of faith preacher on our staff because it charges up my own faith. Joe has something to impart to all of us in this church and I was glad to see so many of you come up and take advantage of it last week. The next step is to act on what was imparted to us. Come out to the street ministry on Thursday night and exercise your faith. Find a spiritual partner, if you don't already have one, who will help to build your faith. Join, or form, a small group that makes it a point to take risks of faith, and to celebrate those risks on a regular basis. The risks don't have to be the kind I described in Decker's book. Not all small groups will be the same, but they should all be exercising faith and growing the church. Kip, our head sound person, made a suggestion after a meeting last Sabbath that I hope many of us will try. It is a perfect way to start a small group. Find two or three friends and get together with the intention of taking turns inviting someone to church. Once a month it is your turn to take the person or couple to dinner, share a bit about your church, and invite them to come.

Then, you sit with the other friends in your group and introduce them to the person or couple you invited. This way every week you are taking turns working together as a team and introducing new people to our church family. Your commitment is to provide one dinner and make one church invitation a month, and to pray for and support the friends who come to church that others in your group invite. Another new approach we want to introduce, starting this morning, is to provide a prophetic word to anyone who is visiting the church for the first time this morning. Paul calls us all to prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:5), which simply involves listening to the Holy Spirit and speaking God's words into the lives of others. If you would like to give that a try come to the office right behind the sound booth after church and you will be given a free copy of the prophetic words you receive. Step

out in faith & try something new, especially if you don't have a spiritual partner or small group, I hear the spirit calling us all to holy accountability.

