

The Wisdom of Small Groups

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By Kyle Matthew Oliver

The continued success of congregations in the so-called megachurch movement has led many mainline Christians to a keen interest in one of the primary evangelical tools of those large congregations: high-quality small groups. This paper examines the wisdom of small groups from a biblical-theological perspective. Theological discussions of Christian small groups tend to emphasize New Testament texts, perspectives, and models. This pattern is perhaps understandable, since the gospels and Paul's letters present compelling visions of ministry by, among, and through small groups.

Thus, Robert J. Banks devotes an entire volume to Pauline conceptions of Christian community (*Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* [Eerdmans, 1980]); Gareth Weldon Icenogle presents a section on Old Testament foundations for small group ministry that is shorter than each of his two NT sections (*Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* [InterVarsity, 1994]). To be fair, the very existence of this section makes Icenogle more part of the solution than the problem; and Jean Vanier draws overwhelmingly from the NT as he frames his idea of community in the

first two chapters of *Community and Growth: Our Pilgrimage Together* (Paulist, 1979: pp. 2-51).

Such emphasis can have two very detrimental effects for biblical study of small group theology. First, a dominant NT focus can cause us to overlook the continuity of Scripture's witness to God's revealed intentions for our life in community. Second, an unbalanced NT reliance omits the unique insight that this strand of OT narrative, poetry, and prophecy offers. Thus, this paper will draw upon the witness of the OT's so-called "E-stream" writers. I argue that these writers define a certain "small group spirit," a theological ethos that offers today's church

and world a vision for thinking through a number of contemporary problems.

In his essay "The Tradition of Mosaic Judges: Past Approaches and New Directions" (in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes*, ed. Steven L. Cook and S.C. Winter [Scholars, 1999]: pp. 286-315), Steven Cook names and proposes additions to a strand of biblical thought whose skepticism about centralized authority serves as a tenacious counterpoint to pro-monarchic OT perspectives (Cook, p. 292). Partly because it includes psalms and prophetic writings whose perspective coheres

(Continued next page)

The Wisdom of Small Groups

(Continued from previous page)

with the Pentateuch's Elohist (E) source, he calls this strand the "E-stream." In addition to the E source, Cook and others have associated Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms of Asaph (50, 73-83) with this *traditio* (Cook, p. 293). An important pair of E texts that help illuminate the theological agenda of the E-stream is the double tradition of the Mosaic judges, Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:14-30. Cook's case for the "strong links between these passages" serves as a helpful summary of the important action in the stories of Moses' need for relief:

They share the motif of the burden of the people on Moses, *which he cannot bear "alone"* (Num. 11:14, 17; Exod. 18:18), the idea of a selection of leaders *from among the people* for the relief of Moses (Num. 11:16; Exod. 18:21, 25), the identical clause *וְאֵשֶׁר יִשָּׂרוּן* ("they will *share* your load"; Num. 11:17; Exod. 18:22), and a report that Moses carried out the *recommended decentralization* of his office (Num. 11:24-25; Exod. 18:24-27) (Cook, p. 291, emphasis added).

Although the full picture of the E-stream is more complex than anything that can be reconstructed from only two passages, this picture is sufficient to suggest the usefulness to small group theology of E-stream texts in general and Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 in particular. The small group spirit decentralizes power, putting people into right relation with each other under God through shared responsibility.

One obvious application of the E-stream authors' thinking is to let Jethro's piece of practical wisdom from the Exodus text speak to the

problems of meeting large congregations' needs and attendant church leader burnout. When he observes Moses trying to meet with everyone in the camp who has a dispute to settle, Jethro admonishes, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone" (Ex. 18:17-18). Even a prophet uniquely related to God (Deut. 34:10) has limited time, energy, and patience; so much more so do church leaders need help from able assistants.

A "pre-Jethro" Mosaic model of congregational leadership, one where the leader tries to interact face-to-face with large numbers of individual church members regularly to support them in their walk of faith, is rarely sustainable. Small groups, on the other hand, provide an alternate and more manageable way for members of the congregation to get face time with trained leaders and spiritual companions. Just as Moses was called to "teach the other appointed leaders" (Icenogle, p. 97), so might a pastor more wisely use his or her time by training small group leaders who — together — can do the job the single leader could not do alone. (Jeffrey Arnold puts it this way: "A skillful group leader shares group care." Unsurprisingly, he appeals only to NT texts in his biblical discussion of this point. *The Big Book on Small Groups*, Revised Edition [InterVarsity, 2004]: p. 56.) The small group spirit is realistic and efficient, and it can give rise to strategic ministry models that ask no single person to bear an unreasonable burden.

Of course, leaders do not always have the best of intentions, and it is to this reality that the full force of the E-stream tradition speaks. As

Icenogle points out, God's vision of human leadership is decentralized not just because of human beings' finite abilities and resources but because of their propensity to sin (Icenogle, p. 95). Mosaic micromanagement is a relatively tame example of the many ways in which the corrupting influence of unrestricted authority manifests itself in E-stream texts; bald-faced land and power grabs as well as outright idolatry are the more serious dangers. The E-stream authors never let the people forget that the centralized monarchy was a seriously problematic human invention to which God assented only hesitantly (Cook, p. 292). One of the more damning examples is Hosea's placement of the monarchy squarely within his prophecy's idolatry-as-national-adultery conceit:

Set the trumpet to your lips!

One like a vulture is over the house of the LORD,
because they have broken my covenant,
and transgressed my law.

Israel cries to me,

"My God, we — Israel — know you!"

Israel has spurned the good;

the enemy shall pursue him.

They made kings, but not through me;

they set up princes, but without my knowledge.

*With their silver and gold they made idols
for their own destruction. ...*

Though I write for him the multitude of my instructions,

they are regarded as a strange thing.

(Hos. 8:1-4, 12)

The idols in the land and the kings who preside over the land are of a piece in their responsibility for Israel's covenant disloyalty. Why is this so? The prophet Micah answers that the people cannot live properly

in the promised land when they lose track of who their true leader is:

Now why do you cry aloud?

Is there no king in you?

*Has your counselor perished,
that pangs have seized you
like a woman in labor? ...*

[N]ow you shall go forth from the city
and camp in the open country;
you shall go to Babylon.

There you shall be rescued,
there *the LORD will redeem you*
from the hands of your enemies.

(Mic. 4:9, 10b)

Hosea and Micah remind us that the LORD alone is the ultimate source of all human achievement and that it is a leader's job (even a king's job) to point to that reality. The Deuteronomistic history that follows the Pentateuch is basically a relentless march toward the conclusion that the kings were, on the whole, very bad at this job. Icenogle helpfully notes that in this task Moses too could fail (e.g., Num. 20:1-13) (Icenogle, p. 95). The Mosaic judges tradition is a kind of antidote for that failure, the means by which "God would supply the authority and wisdom to empower multiple circles of leaders ... to be dependent upon God and interdependent with one another" (Icenogle, 97).

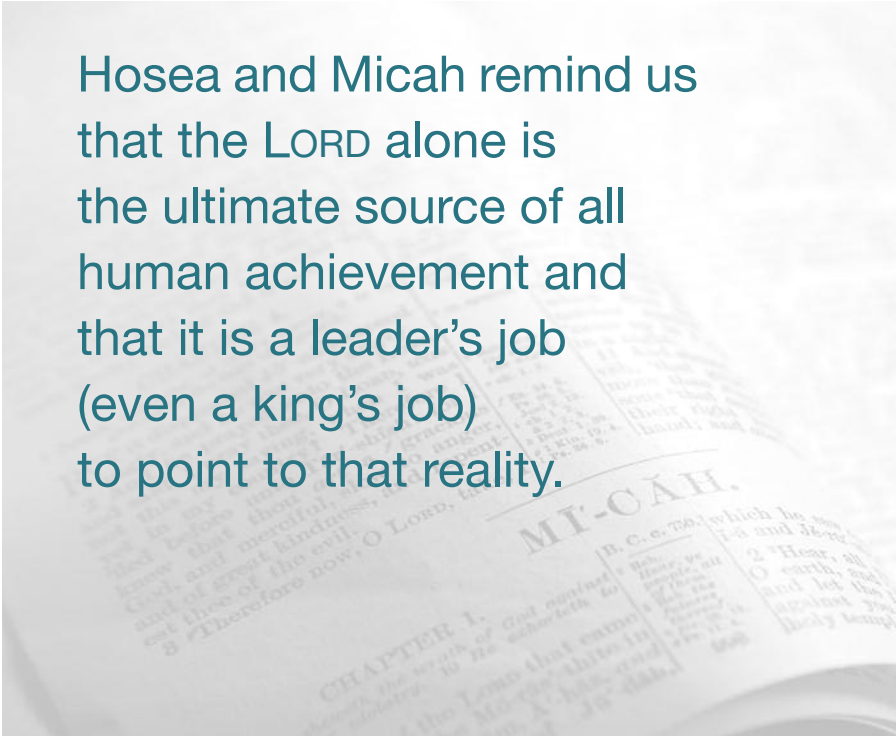
The important thing to take away from these E-stream texts is their connection of centralized power to covenant disloyalty; the law stipulates that the only appropriate center for the lives of God's people is God. Small groups, especially small groups led as advocates like Roberta Hestenes propose (i.e., in a style that moves from authoritative, though not autocratic, to democratic. *Using the Bible in Groups* [Westminster, 1983]: p. 41), protect against poten-

tial trouble partly because they so lend themselves to models of distributed authority — helping us keep our eyes fixed on the Holy One, per God's own instruction.

As for how we treat each other,

neighbor's boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess" (Deut. 19:14).

The point is that the E-stream



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the E-stream writers again portray the small group spirit as part and parcel of covenant living. Deuteronomy overflows with this spirit because its proposal for living "in the land" (Deut. 12:1) is built on the mechanism of mutuality. Justice is to be administered with no "partiality" (Deut. 16:19); kings "must not acquire many horses ... [or] wives ... [or] gold" from the people (Deut. 17:16-17); priests "shall have no allotment or inheritance" and so must be supported when they come to "minister in the name of the LORD his God," receiving "equal portions to eat" (Deut. 18:1, 7, 8); and, significantly, no one may "move your

writers envision a world in which peace and justice is maintained by individuals' active commitment to live reconciled with the various small groups of which they are a part because of their landedness. Notably, when things go wrong, Hosea draws imagery to describe the miscarriage of justice from the Deuteronomist: "The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark; / on them I will pour out my wrath like water //" (Hos. 5:10; see Deut. 19:14, 27:17). It's as if Hosea can think of no better way to describe the gravity of the king's misdeed than to compare it to

(Continued next page)

The Wisdom of Small Groups

(Continued from previous page)

that of the individual who betrays the small group spirit and violates his neighbors' trust and very humanity by redefining the boundaries of the adjacent properties.

Indeed, the weighty spirit of intimate mutuality on display in Deuteronomy challenges us to think big about the vocation of small groups. At one time, they were at the heart of God's plan for sustainable and peaceable living for God's chosen people. What reason can we have for thinking that this plan has changed? Of course, life looks a great deal different in the West thousands of years later, so the Pentateuchal plan is not quite going to cut it; the very existence of Deuteronomy has been attributed to "the necessity of ongoing revision to biblical material in light of changed times and circumstances" (Brent A. Strawn, "Deuteronomy," *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R.

O'Day and David L. Petersen [Westminster John Knox, 2009]: p. 71). But if Deuteronomy's vision of a just society maintained by mutual commitment and accountability among families, neighbors, and villages sounds laughably naïve to us, perhaps that's why the kingdom of God seems to be anything but at hand in today's disconnected world.

Let me close by clarifying what I meant in the introduction's second criticism of small group theologies built on NT concepts alone. In my opinion, the unique insight of these E-stream texts is that the small group spirit should be normative not just for the church but for society. This witness is important, because it reminds us that Jesus' hierarchical but decentralized missionary and discipleship project and Paul's carrying it on via a network of mutually supportive but largely independent local churches were founded on the

very patterns of life that God handed down in the Torah and upon which he established covenants in which we as Christians claim a part (Rom. 4:16). If we are not careful to keep relevant NT and OT visions in conversation, in my opinion we are in danger of viewing small groups as merely strategic rather than normative, a gift given for the church and not through it. (Notice that I am certainly not claiming that Jesus or Paul were being merely strategic or were not aware of how God called — and is calling — us to live together. What I am claiming is this: because the small group spirit proved so effective in responding to the Great Commission, because the disciples and the early church lived together so inspiringly in that spirit, and because we rightly see small groups as an important tool for building up the church today, we focus too narrowly on small groups as strategic and as necessary for the life of the church and forget the fact that they are also society-enabling and necessary for the life of the world. One great gift of God through these E-stream authors is the way in which they continually remind us of this grander small group vision. But as Jeremiah notes, writing that grander vision "on [our] hearts" is the very essence of the "new covenant" [Jer. 31:31-33]. Thus, as I said, the biblical vision for small groups is continuous if we but look for it.)

Quite to the contrary, a faithful theology of small group ministry should envision the very broadest and grandest of purposes for these building blocks of society. Small groups are the blueprint for living in covenant relation with God, with each other, and with creation — three tasks that Hebraic thought

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[Jer. 31:31-33]

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understands as inseparable. (Compare to the NT tendency toward non-holistic, Greek-philosophical dualisms like flesh versus spirit [e.g., John 6:63, Rom. 8, 1 Cor. 5:5, Gal. 6:8, 1 John 2:16]. I'm painting with admittedly broad strokes here, but a full comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.)

The OT envisions a decentralized hierarchy of communities of gradually increasing size; the “whole house of Israel” (לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל) is no more and no less than scores of families comprising many clans comprising twelve tribes comprising one nation worshipping one God. The OT vision of a just society challenges Christians especially sharply and poignantly to witness to a way of life in which the people are neither fettered servants of the centralized powers nor individual agents afloat in a sea of undifferentiated humanity. Small groups are the building blocks of a society in which people live together in sustainable mutuality and full human dignity. A commitment to imbuing our lives and communities (*not* just our churches) with this small group spirit is yet another way Christians can, to borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation” (*Life Together* [Harper & Brothers]: p. 23). ■

Kyle Matthew Oliver is beginning his third year of M.Div. studies at Virginia Theological Seminary, where he will continue coordinating the twice-weekly Forum Hour and serve as the teaching assistant for Christian ethics. He spent part of his summer writing online curriculum (available soon at IntoAllTheWWWorld.org) on the conversation between science and theology.

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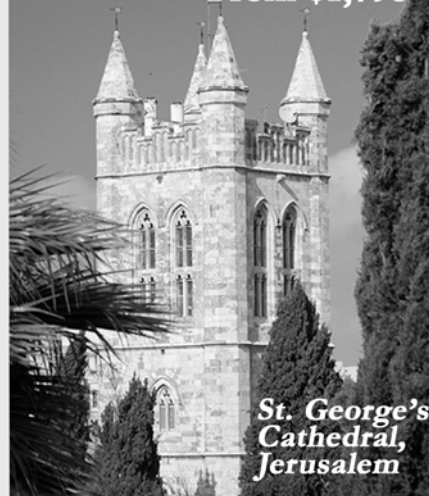
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