

## **The Biblical Teaching on Conventicles and Small Groups**

**By Rev. Dr. Timothy A. Rossow**

**Bethany Lutheran Church and School, Naperville, Illinois**

**Approved by the Pastors and Elders - May 10, 2006 (updated May, 2007)**

Two Sundays ago I mentioned in the sermon that C. F. W. Walther spoke against conventicles in the church (*The proper Form of a Christian Congregation...*, par. 25). Conventicles are not identical with what are called small groups today but they are very similar. Some members of the congregation were troubled that small groups would be spoken against in our church. This paper is intended to clarify some of the questions being raised about small groups in the church. If you have any questions please speak with one of the pastors or elders.

### **What is a Conventicle?**

Conventicles are groups of instruction and prayer that are held apart from the supervision of the office of the ministry. In other words they are held without the pastor's knowledge or permission. In the mainline churches they were mostly limited to the period of church history known as *Pietism* (1700 – 1850) and resurfaced again in the late 1960's and 1970's. These two periods of history are known for an emphasis on individualism and a stress on emotions over reason. Conventicles also tend to be prominent across the ages in those churches that have an unbiblical doctrine of the office of the ministry such as Pentecostal and charismatic churches. In those churches there is no divine call of a pastor. Instead those who feel the anointing of the Holy Spirit are the ones who become pastors if they can get a congregation to follow them. It is also common in these denominations to have everyone feel as though they are a prophet (pastor) and so they speak as they feel moved by the Holy Spirit in the small prayer meetings that are common in these denominations.

Many Protestant churches in the last generation, including congregations in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod have embraced an approach to church organization called *Small Group Ministry*. Other churches have not gone so far as to organize around small groups but they do promote the formation of small groups within the congregation. Are these small groups the same as conventicles? Is this a good thing for the church?

### **What is the Problem with Conventicles?**

The first president of the LCMS, C. F. W. Walther spoke against conventicles because they are outside the God-given parameters of the supervision of the office of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11, I Peter 5:1ff., etc.) and because they threaten the unity of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12). We could add to that, by way of clarification of the first point, that conventicles do not fit into the manner in which God has decided to bring His word to the church as described in the Scriptures (the ordering of the Gospel). Thus there are three concerns with conventicles:

1. They are outside of the God-given supervision of the pastor.
2. They lead to division.
3. They are outside of God's ordering of the Gospel.

Concern 1: They are outside of the God-given supervision of the pastor.

The pastor is responsible for each soul in the congregation. Consider the following Bible passages that talk about this responsibility. First we hear Paul's words to the elders (pastors) in Ephesus who labored in the word and doctrine.

**Acts 20:17** Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. **18** And when they came to him, he said to them: . . . **28** Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. **29** I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; **30** and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. **31** Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. **32** And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Notice that Paul calls the pastors overseers of the flock. This is the chief thing that Paul is concerned about when he has these closing words with the pastors from Ephesus. He also instructs them that their primary job as shepherds is to scare off the wolves that bring false teaching from within the church. We often refer to a pastor as *pastoral* because he has a nice bedside manner or a gentle way. The Bible uses *pastoral* in the sense of *tough firm beating away of false-doctrine wolves*. This is a huge responsibility that is often taken lightly in today's church.

Notice also that these wolves will come from within the church as well as from without. False doctrine can and will arise from within the church. The pastor needs to oversee the congregation so this does not happen. When all sorts of small groups are created for instruction and prayer the pastor's ability to supervise the Word in the church is greatly compromised. Doctrinal error comes from within the church as much as from without.

Notice also that there are several pastors in Ephesus even at this early stage in the church's history. It is a myth that the New Testament church met in homes and was organized around small groups. In every place that he went, after instructing the people, Paul appointed pastors for the congregations.

(See also I Peter 5:1-5 for further support of the pastor's role as overseer of the Gospel in the congregation and Acts 2:42-47 where it is clear that the early church did not meet to study without the apostles leading.)

Concern 2: Conventicles lead to division.

Your small group may have sound doctrine and may not be divisive but many have seen and testify to how they often become divisive and do tolerate false doctrine. The temptation is great to use the small group to complain about the church or about the pastor or to gossip about others. The church is a body with Christ as the head and the pastor as the under shepherd of Christ. It is also hard for church members to recognize false doctrine and then even when it is spotted it is hard for one member to criticize another member's doctrine. What usually happens is that false doctrines are just left

unchecked in small groups, if recognized at all. I do not always know exactly what is wrong with me when I am sick but I do not go to a neighborhood small group discussion on medicine to find out. My doctor is trained in medicine and so I go to her to find out what is wrong with me. My pastor is trained in doctrine and so I go to him for knowledge about religious truth.

As an example of this let me share with you a recent example of proof texting in one of our Bible classes. Matthew 18:20 was recently used by a lay person to justify small groups. It says “where two or three are gathered in my name there am I.” When one looks at the context of this verse it is clear that it is not about small group Bible study but is about taking a brother along with one to rebuke another erring brother for their sin. This verse is all about the authority God has given to the church to rebuke sin, not for the church to reorganize itself around small groups. I have been in hundreds of small group Bible studies and know that this sort of misinterpretation happens all the time. That makes sense when I think of how I will often try to play “Dr. Tim” on myself. My wife could verify the countless times that I have made a pronouncement about a given ailment only to end up going to the real doctor and finding out that my self diagnosis was not even in the ballpark.

I Corinthians 12 speaks about the body of Christ and how He has arranged it in a particular way with different people having different tasks.

**I Corinthians 12:12** For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... **14** For the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15** If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. **16** And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? **18** But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose... **27** Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. **28** And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Christ is the head of the body and He has arranged the body in a certain way, each part doing its job. Pastors are called by God to preach and teach the word in the body (v. 28). Through this teaching there is unity in the body. (If the pastor should err then the body needs to point that out so that he may repent of his error and return to teaching the truth.) When there are small groups for instruction and prayer in the congregation apart from the supervision of the pastor the climate is ripe for division. Paul rebukes that sort of behavior in the first chapter of I Corinthians.

**I Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. **11** For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. **12** What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” **13** Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? **14** I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, **15** so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

As so many of us have experienced in this church and others, division is always a threat in the local congregation. Starting small groups in the church increases the odds that such division will exist.

Some say that they have been involved in small group programs in other churches that had good doctrinal control. In many cases that works because doctrinal purity is not a major priority in those congregations. It is common for churches that promote small groups to violate Scripture by practicing open communion, practice unionism and syncretism by joining in heterodox and pluralistic worship services and other laxity of scripture. Most egregiously they usually use doctrinal materials of a mixed kind. In the last 10 years small group churches have embraced books such as the *40 Days of Purpose* which are filled with false teaching and poor Bible interpretation. To complicate matters, it is often this material that is used in the small group study sessions where there is no pastor present!

### Concern 3: They are outside of God's ordering of the Gospel.

God has ordered (put in order) the left hand kingdom of this world and He has ordered the right hand kingdom of His Gospel. We usually do not have problems with accepting the ordering of the left hand kingdom. It is in the right hand kingdom that we find more problems.

God's ordering of the left hand kingdom includes things like the power of the sword granted to governments and the orders of creation such as male and female marriage only and the headship of the male in the household. For the most part we accept these orders although radical feminism has made some headway into the church. (For instance, the most recent LCMS convention wrongly voted to allow women to be elders and assist the pastor with Holy Communion.) Most people in the LC - MS rightly reject the arguments of the world that gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry. This is not only contrary to God's word but it is contrary to the way God has ordered things in the left hand kingdom. Marriage of male and female is not just a religious truth, it is a physical truth created into the very fabric of our being. It is rebellion against God and His creation to establish the marriage of same sex couples. Since the very first sin of Adam and Eve we have been vigorously fighting against God and His ways in order to establish our own sinful selves and ways in His place.

The same is true in the right hand kingdom of the Gospel. God has a given order to how the Gospel is to be stewarded just as we are to steward His created things in His way. There are basically three levels to this order: 1) the Gospel is given to all Christians and not just to an individual (pope) or small group (bishops) within the church; 2) the head of the household is responsible to teach the Word of God in his household and 3) the pastor is responsible to be the teacher in the congregation.

1) All Christians have joint ownership of the Gospel with one another. This is why any individual Christian can pray the psalms or read the Bible in a devotional way. But this first ordering of the gospel does not give authority to any Christian over another because each individual Christian has the full rights of the Gospel himself, thus no one has any unique authority over another. All are equal; no one can teach another by this first order. Martin Luther has an insightful quote on this in volume 40, p. 34 of his works

(available in the church library). He reminds us that we all have the full authority of the scriptures but that does not make us all teachers.

It is of the common rights of Christians that we have been speaking. For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. Lay hold then of this right and exercise it, where there is no one else who has the same rights. But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights shall perform these functions publicly.

The reason this joint ownership of the Gospel is so important is that it keeps one person (a pope or church dictator) from claiming that he alone has the power to decide what God's word says and does not say. The Bible is everyone's property and cannot be controlled by anyone person. But that does not make everyone a teacher or capable of being a small group leader nor does it authorize small groups. Point three of the ordering of the Gospel shows us that God has called certain people (pastors) to steward the Gospel in the congregation. Before we come to that third point it is good to look at the second ordering of the Gospel within the church: the household.

2) God has also ordered his Gospel to be taught in the home.

**Ephesians 6:4** Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

This is why Luther wrote the Large Catechism, so that fathers would have a summary of Christian doctrine to read and teach to their families. Luther called the husband the *house pastor*. Each husband and father is the pastor of his house and is responsible to take what he has learned at church and make sure that his family understands it. The family unit is the original divinely ordered small group in the church. If the Christian church at large and the LC - MS specifically would spend as much time promoting the household church as they do small groups, the church would flourish. This is why at Bethany we spend so much time talking about doing family devotions. A husband and father has God-given authority in his household. That is another way God has given order to the administration of the Gospel. God did not leave the left hand kingdom without order and He did not leave the right hand kingdom without order.

There are interesting insights that come up concerning small groups when one considers this second order of authority. What happens when the Schmidt household decides they want to get together with the Weber household for a small group Bible study? House pastor Schmidt has authority over his own household but has no authority over the Weber household and vice versa. What if the two households decide to grant that authority to one or the other house pastors? What they have just done is created a church with an ordained (ordered) pastor. They did not mean to create a church but they did. They did not mean any harm by it, only good, but they have created a new church with its own pastor. What they are forgetting is that they have already done this by joining with their local congregation. They have already called a pastor for their joint families and for all the families together of the whole congregation. From this standpoint, it is clear to see that small groups are little congregations within the larger congregation and that is

contrary to God's ordering of the Gospel and is ripe for causing great confusion in the congregation. That takes us to the third ordering of the Gospel, the ordained minister.

3) The divinely called pastor is intended by God to be the teacher and preacher to the larger congregation. All through the scriptures there is no mention of or promotion of small groups for administering the word. Instead, God's plan in the scriptures is to get the word to His people through the institutions of father and pastor. (See the section below on small groups in the Bible for more on this.)

Paul describes this ordering when he gives instructions to Titus:

**Titus 1:5** This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders (pastors) in every town as I directed you...

Listen to how the Bible describes the work of pastors.

**I Peter 5:1** So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **2** shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **3** not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. **4** And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Pastors are under shepherds of the chief Shepherd Jesus Christ. They are to exercise oversight in the congregation. They are to oversee the congregation but without being domineering.

**Ephesians 4:11** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **14** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Pastors are the ones God has given to the church to equip the other members of the church with true doctrine.

**I Corinthians 4:1** This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. **2** Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

The pastors are the ones who steward the mysteries of God (His word and sacraments).

**6:1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. **2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." **5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

Here we see that the apostles were to be the ones to do the ministry of the word (preaching and teaching) and the laity was to do the work of waiting on tables. Also note that it was the apostles who developed this plan (pastors do the work of coming up with plans for the work of the congregation) and that plan was presented to the people for their consideration.

**1 Timothy 4:11** Command and teach these things. **12** Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. **13** Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. **14** Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Paul's command to young Pastor Timothy makes it very clear whose calling it is in the congregation to teach the word, exhort (preach) and even read the word publicly. Paul does not tell Timothy to share this work with others even though he was young and might not be respected by the congregation. Paul gives further instructions to Pastor Timothy in a second letter

**4:1** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: **2** preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. **3** For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, **4** and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

It is no wonder that there is no mention of small groups in the Bible. God has already arranged to accomplish what small groups accomplish through the office of the ministry. God's way of teaching the word is through His called servants.

### **Is Every Meeting of a Small Group in the Church Considered a Conventicle?**

No they are not. Conventicles are groups that meet for instruction or prayer or both, apart from the pastor's supervision. There are many small groups that meet in the church that are not conventicles because their purpose is not to study scripture (e.g. 55 Plus, PTL meetings and activities, Youth Group activities, etc.).

### **Is Every Small Group Bible Study a Conventicle? Are There Small Group Bible Studies that are Acceptable at Bethany?**

Not every small group Bible study is a conventicle and there are small group Bible studies sponsored at Bethany. It is acceptable for the local congregation to establish small groups for prayer and study that are tethered to the pastor. The definition of the *tethering* is the key.

Why is the group to be tethered to the pastor? They are to be tethered because 1) the Bible describes the administration of the word and sacraments as coming from the pastor, 2) the pastor is responsible for the sheep in his care and the primary way he shepherds is by keeping false teaching out of the congregation (see Acts 20: 29-31) and if there are groups of instruction apart from his teaching, he will not be able to fulfill this duty and 3) small groups meeting apart from the pastor can compromise the truth of the word by turning scripture study into a) mere reflection of one's own opinions, b) an

exercise in applying the text to everyday situations without really knowing what the text says and c) a mere emotional exercise.

Some LC - MS congregations believe that if the pastor trains the leaders of the small groups then the small groups are sufficiently tethered to the office of the ministry. This is certainly **not** in keeping with how the Bible describes the teaching of the word. The Bible describes the congregation gathered around the pastor for instruction. Also, for most laymen (not all) to be competent to lead a study they would need the near equivalent of a seminary education. We all know how difficult Bible study can be and how many times we ask questions that even push the pastors to the limits of their understanding. Most of the congregations that are organized around small group study almost always also exhibit other errors in Bible study such as reading and promoting heterodox books and themes such as *The Purpose Driven Life*, *Promise Keepers*, etc. It is amazing how this works. Small group practice usually goes hand in hand with a desire to read and study the latest watered down fad in the church. Walther reminds us in duty two of the church that we ought to use only doctrinally pure books and resources in the church. This is common sense. Would we ever give our children medicine that is only half strength of what it should be, or perish the thought, medicine that actually harms our children?

This is not to forbid laymen from teaching the word. There are many individuals in this congregation whose doctrine and life are known to the pastors to be sufficient for helping the pastor teach an occasional class session or even an entire term of Bible study. The pastor is responsible on judgment day for the sheep God has given him to undershepherd and so this is not taken lightly. Members should not be offended if the pastor has not tapped them on the shoulder to help out. It is rare and sometimes coincidental circumstances that lead the pastor to have trust in a given member to assist in the teaching work of the church.

As stated at the beginning of this section, we actually already do have small groups that meet at Bethany that are endorsed by our pastors. For several years we have had two formats of Lighthouse. The first one follows the traditional format. Every Friday we have a women's Bible study that meets at church for one hour of small group discussion of the homework they have prepared and then they meet for one hour for a lecture by and discussion with the pastor. On Wednesday evenings Pastor Rossow changed the format to allow people to meet in their homes. That group meets for an hour every other Wednesday in people's homes to discuss the Lighthouse homework they have prepared and then they meet the opposite Wednesday for study with the pastor. Every fall this Wednesday night in-home format is advertised to the congregation but so far only one group has been formed. There is plenty of room in each of these programs for more members.

### **Examples of Small Group Bible Studies Gone Wrong**

Just this Spring one of the members of our Ladies Lighthouse group made a point in a discussion about punishment and discipline from God. As it turned out her approach was thoughtful but unawares to her, led to a false teaching of works righteousness. The pastor was able to correct her. Later in that same session the pastor spoke about the problems with small group Bible studies aside from the office of the ministry. That same woman volunteered herself as "example A" of how we can be misled without the guidance of the pastor. Any pastor can tell you that even for them it is difficult to keep

the Gospel pure. It is not an easy task which is why the Bible is full of warnings against false doctrine (Galatians 1, Acts 20, I John, Revelation, etc.).

This example from Lifestream is useful for seeing the inability of laity to really know whether they are properly understanding the truth of God's Word. Every supporter of small groups that I have ever talked to has said that there may be false doctrine in other groups but never in theirs. It is amazing how that works. Everyone who supports small group Bible study aside from the office of the ministry believes that they are in the perfect small group and yet the question needs to be asked, by what authority can they make that claim? It is most likely that the fox is in the hen house and the hens do not recognize the fox for who he is. God has given us pastors to keep the word straight. The pastors are the ones trained to recognize false doctrine just as our doctors are trained to recognize illness in us. For sure, the pastors need to be held accountable for the word they teach by each other and the laity. Back in the 1970's it was primarily the lay people who saved the synod from the errors of historical criticism. But, the normal way that God administers the word is through the pastors. Luther's table of duties makes it clear that pastors are to preach and laity are to listen.

We have had several members come out of the non-denominational conventicle known as Bible Study Fellowship (BSF). While they appreciated the intent of BSF to get people into the scriptures they lament the fact that there is a lot of false teaching in the organization (they reject the sacraments power to forgive and teach decision theology). One of our members was verbally accosted by his BSF group when he stood up for the true scriptural teaching of the power of baptism. There are no called pastors supervising BSF sessions. There are also people from different congregations that attend. If I come from a different congregation than you and you and I have a difference in opinion on what a text of the Bible means, who is right? Where is the God-given shepherd to resolve the dispute?

During the last few weeks many people have come forward to tell stories of small groups that went wrong either by divisiveness or by bad teaching or by both. That in itself is not a reason to reject something. We have given several other reasons to reject small groups. It is also important to know that there are several testimonies of people who have been in small groups and have seen the problems arise that we have described here. Both of Bethany's pastors have been in small groups and even use to promote them in previous congregations but by trial and error both pastors have come to see that small groups aside from the pastor's supervision are not a part of God's ordering of the Gospel.

### **But I am too Intimidated to Ask My Pastor Questions**

Some people say that they are too intimidated to ask the pastor questions or to participate in a pastor led study. That is a problem. Our pastors need to be approachable. But if that is the problem the answer is not to form small group Bible studies. That would be like saying *I am too intimidated by my doctor to ask him questions so I decided to set up a small group medical study in my neighborhood where we discuss the latest medical issues and diagnose each others medical problems.* The pastor is like a medical doctor for the soul. Pastors in the LCMS have more education than general practitioners. They are trained to give out the medication for the soul (God's word and sacraments).

### **What about Sunday School and Youth Bible Class – Aren't those Small Group Bible Studies Independent of the Office of the Ministry?**

We usually assume that Sunday School is a given but actually it is only 100 years old. Walther and Luther never had Sunday Schools, nor for that matter did the church for the first 1900 years of its existence. Sunday School classes are an extension of the office of the ministry and an extension of the office of house pastor. While the children are still at home the parents have the right to give them over to the church for instruction. Sunday School is a good thing but it is not a necessary thing. If any of our parents decide to keep their children out of Sunday School because they teach them at home, that is fine.

Where there is a Sunday School it should only be done if the house pastor understands that he is entrusting some of his authority to the Sunday School teacher. Where there is Sunday School the pastor also needs to make sure that there is sufficient pastoral oversight in the program. This is an area that Bethany could improve on. If we go to the new church service times, there will be more pastoral time available to supervise Sunday School on a Sunday morning. Many churches that have day schools use one of the day school teachers to supervise the Sunday School program. This is another fine option that keeps it tethered to the pastor since the day school teachers are called to assist the pastor in administering God's Word.

Notice that Confirmation is not the same as Sunday School. The pastors and day school teachers teach the classes. In churches where there is no day school, there are laymen who sometimes teach confirmation. This is not an ideal practice. We encourage churches who do such to make arrangements for the pastor to teach confirmation or at the very least, teach the eighth grade class so that the pastor can be held accountable for the examination of the children.

### **It Doesn't Take a Village! It Takes a House Pastor and a Congregation Pastor**

Liberal politicians are known these days for spouting socialist and communist phrases such as *it takes a village to raise a child*. Many rightly see this as an attempt to undo the order of the family that God has established. According to Scripture, it does not take a village of small groups to inculcate godly spirituality in the church. Instead it takes a house pastor and congregation pastor. That is God's way.

Who among us has not complained that we are stretched too thin in today's world and that we do not get enough quality time with our families? Small group Bible studies are just one more night away from the family and one more busy thing to do. The church would thrive if all Christians committed to a simple approach to spirituality. Individuals should read scripture devotionally each day from 5 to 90 minutes, house pastors should read and teach the Bible and the large catechism for 5 minutes to 90 minutes each day around the meal table to those under their care and congregation pastors should preach the word and administer the sacraments in the divine service and then teach the Word in greater detail in Bible class. The total out of home commitment in this traditional Lutheran model is 2 hours: one hour for the divine service and one hour for Bible class (while the children are in Sunday School). This is then supplemented by teaching from the house pastor and daily devotional reading (reading and prayer) of the scriptures. In addition to the devotional reading of the scriptures, a person could also add as much time in a week as they choose to study the scriptures with the Book of Concord guiding them.

### **Can There Be Small Groups for Things Other than Bible Study?**

Yes there should be. That helps to bring the church together so that we can know when one is rejoicing and when one is hurting (I Corinthians 12). Small groups can and should be arranged for fun and fellowship (cards groups, dinner parties, etc.)

### **What About Small Group Bible Studies that May be Going on at Bethany?**

No one can stop a group of people from meeting. Because of the reasons given in this paper the pastors and elders encourage people to stop attending and sponsoring small group Bible studies apart from our regular program of Bible study. We hope that the members of the congregation will respect the pastors and elders teaching on this subject.

### **Small Groups in the Bible**

The Bible does not promote small groups for study and prayer. Apart from the family unit which we discussed above, the only evidence of small groups in the Bible is in Corinth and that was a disaster. In chapter one Paul chides the Corinthians because they have divided into different camps. Some followed Chloe, some Apollos and some Peter. It is not clear that these were small groups *per se* but they were tearing apart the Corinthian church. Later in chapter 12 Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are all one body in Christ. Paul's word to the Corinthians is that the church needs to act as one body with Christ at the head. Even though the Corinthians had their own little cliques, chapter 14 makes it clear that they still all gathered together in one place for worship. They did not meet in small groups for instruction and prayer. There may have been allowance for more than one prophet (pastor) speaking at the service but at least they were still gathered together in one place for worship.

The latest version of the small group theory (1960's and 70's) has falsely taught that the early church met in small house churches which are then equated with the small groups in the church today. This is just not true. Study the scriptures and you will not see the church divided into small groups apart from the proper supervision of the pastor. Instead, we see Paul establishing elders (pastors) in every village and town that he evangelized (see Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5).

The early church most likely did meet in homes but these were probably the larger homes of wealthier members such as Joseph of Arimathea or Lydia of Philippi. These wealthy Christians would have had several servants living with them and the most logical speculation is that the early churches met in the dining halls of these large complexes where there would be room for the 50 to 100 family and servants family members. The other outstanding feature about this matter is that as soon as Christianity was legalized by Emperor Constantine, the Christians came out from their homes and purchased large public buildings for worship. It is just bad Bible understanding that teaches that the early church was organized around small groups. They were organized around the same word and sacraments administered by ordained pastors as we still practice today.

In the period before Moses there were no small groups. In that period, known as the patriarchal period of the Bible, there were only house fathers (thus the word *patriarch*). After the period of the patriarchs God established the ritual worship of the

tabernacle and temple with the priests officiating. There was also a rich practice of house-pastoring since the head of the household was responsible to celebrate the Passover and was also responsible for teaching his children. During the period of Jesus' ministry there was Jesus, the twelve and the seventy-two. Jesus *pastored* them directly and then sent them out from house to house to preach the Gospel. After the time of Jesus, we see the word being administered as we described above, i.e. house pastors and congregation pastors.

### **Summary**

The Bible does not endorse small groups. Instead the Bible is very clear on how the word is to be preached and taught in the congregation by pastors and in the homes by the head of the household. The Bible is also very clear that the Word will be corrupted even in the church. It is not easy to maintain purity of doctrine. Paul's interaction with the Galatians and Corinthians and John's epistles and letters to the seven churches in Revelation is a clear testimony to that. We also have several examples of members who have been in small groups that were divisive and filled with unchecked false teaching. In light of all this it is clear that small group Bible study is not in keeping with how God has designed the administration of His Word in the church, but if there is a way to clearly tether the small groups to direct instruction from the pastor, such an approach can be in keeping with what God has laid out in His Word.