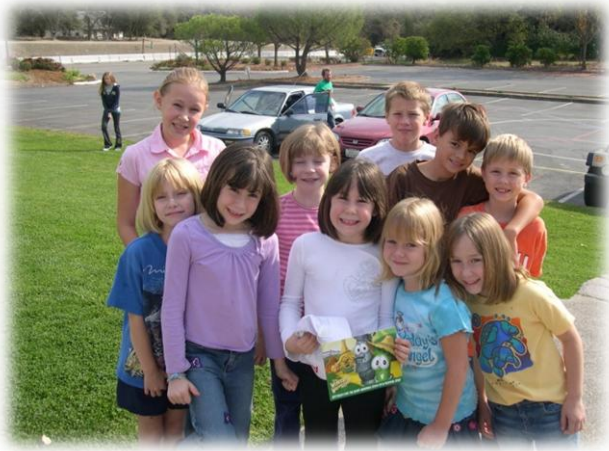




50 Days of Irresistible Community

Part II



**Understanding God's Heart
for Authentic Christian Community**

Pastor Stan Lubeck

2008

Spiritual Growth Opportunities

Our desire is that The **LIFEhouse** Church will be a warm healthy spiritual environment where everyone is actively seeking to grow to spiritual maturity in Christ. We take the command of Jesus very seriously that instructs us to make disciples (students) of Christ to the ends of the earth. The following materials are the tools we use to help people to begin and maintain this lifelong process of obediently following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If you are connected to a **LIFEgroup**, be sure to ask the leader for assistance as you continue this marvelous life changing process!

Trail Guide:

- Spiritual Growth Map

Basics of the Faith:

- Knowing Jesus As Lord
- Experiencing God's Forgiveness
- Experiencing God's Power
- Experiencing God's Love

Essentials:

Third Time Visitor Reception.

- [What is The LIFEhouse Church? \(Welcome Dessert\)](#)
- Firm Foundations (8 week rotating midweek class)
- Baptism Education Class (1 hour)
- [How to Belong to The LIFEhouse?](#)
- **LIFEgroup** (small group) involvement?
- [New Member Reception?](#)
- Serving in a Ministry
- Mentoring Ministry

Electives – Values:

- Climbing Essentials: The Disciplines of the Faith
- Little Communities in the Kingdom of God
- God's Design for His Church (spiritual gifts assessment)
- Jesus, Teach Us to Pray (The Lord's Prayer)
- Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity
- Doing Battle in the Heavens
- God's Heart for His Church (Part 1 & 2)
- Prayer Evangelism
- Seeking God's Heart for Prayer

WEEK

4

The New Community in Action

An Illustration of the Importance of Little Communities

DAY 1

Review

God's plan is for His people to live in little communities— *LIFEgroups*. We have seen in our previous studies that:

- ❖ God Himself chooses to live in a little community called the Trinity
- ❖ Jesus lived in a little community of twelve when He walked on this earth

The early church lived in little communities from the Day of Pentecost until the fourth century.

Little Communities are More Than Just "Small"

There is much more to living in a little community than just getting together with other Christians in a *LIFEgroup*. See what lessons we can learn from the following story:

A man and his wife visited a small church in southern Indiana. They went to the Sunday school class for their age group and later shared the following experience:

"There were about fifteen of us in the class. The man who was serving as moderator said, `Folks, I ran into Bill Foster in the hardware store yesterday. He explained to me that he and Helen were divorcing. He has moved out of their house. They talked it over and

Colossians

3:16-17

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

decided that neither one of them would feel comfortable coming back to our class under the circumstances. Each of them is going to go elsewhere, and he asked me to tell you this so they wouldn't be embarrassed if either one bumped into one of you.'



"After a few moments of stunned silence, one of the class members said, 'Why, I attended our class party in their home a month ago. I didn't know they were having problems. Did any of you know their marriage was in danger?' Everyone shook their heads 'No.' The group had been together between three and four years— never becoming close enough to sense such a deep problem! The couple floated off into oblivion, sincerely wanting to be left alone as they went through their traumas." (From Where Do We Go From Here?, Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., pg. 51)

Too many of us have been in similar situations. Change the location and the names and the story would be the same. Just because a group is small does not mean the dynamic life of Christ is present.

When we live together with Jesus, it is He Who is important, He Who is central. When we gather in our little groups, we gather around Him — we don't gather around our Bible. The problem with many in the church is that they value knowledge about God more than a relationship with God. Our Bibles can become a shield to protect us from truly applying the word of God in our lives.

The reason I share this story is not to say that there is something wrong with Sunday school classes. I do it to illustrate that there is much more to **LIFEgroup** community life than just the size of the group. It is critical that it is a **LIFEgroup**, but there is more to it than size. For instance, in this true story:

the group had about 15 participants— getting on the big side, but still small enough to share deeply in one another's lives.

- they were Christians
- they had a Bible lesson together every week
- they had class socials
- they had been together for three to four years

But there was not *biblical* community going on. There was not true *biblical* fellowship happening between the people of that group. There was not the deep sharing of the real stuff of their lives together, where part of what they did as a group was to confess their sins to one another and pray for one another so they could be healed. That is why the people in this class were stunned and shocked.

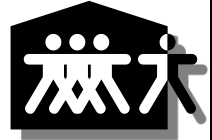
What do you see as differences between the Sunday school class in the above story and what we have learned about *LIFEgroups* from the early church in the book of Acts?

What is the dynamic that separates biblical community and biblical fellowship from community and fellowship that takes place in other small groups (i.e. computer users group, quilting group, committee of a service organization, etc.)?

How can you apply this lesson to your life? _____

DAY 2

Key Factors of Small Group Life



As we have previously seen, the early church was characterized by both large and small group gatherings— Acts 2:46 and 5:42. When it comes to the church gathering in a large group setting, nearly all of us are familiar with that, because that is how we have been exposed to the church in the past.

When it comes to the church gathering in small groups, usually in homes, we have varying experiences. Some of us have never known living the Christian life in any other way. Some of us have never been a part of a **LIFEgroup** or we have sporadically attended one over the years.

It was in the house churches, the small groups, where the early believers met with Jesus in their midst. They were not merely intellectually acknowledging that God is everywhere or that Jesus promised to be with us always and so He is here. The presence of Christ is not just factual information to be acknowledged and accepted as true. It is also experiential. We meet *with* Jesus, with Whom we have a relationship, with Whom we speak in prayer, and to Whom we sing songs of worship and praise.

Some of us are nervous about what will happen if we meet personally with Jesus. We are afraid of weird things happening. But we are talking about a relationship, and where there is relationship, there is experience.

Since we have a relationship *with* Jesus, we experience Him. If you are married, you experience your spouse, for good or bad, because you are bound together in a relationship with one another. You also



experience your baby, your children, your parents, etc. because you have a relationship with them.

In the same way, the early church centered their group life around the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and so they experienced His life together. It is through the written Word that God wants us to meet with the Living Word. It is through the written Word that we discern the spirits. Do we pursue experience? No. We pursue Jesus. In the pursuing of Him, He grants what is good for His children and we experience Him. Much more was going on in the early church than sitting in a circle looking at one another!

I also realize that many of us have been in *LIFEgroups* that have not been like what I just described. There are groups that go deeper and deeper into the Word with no thought of application. There are other groups that meet mainly for fellowship and hardly touch on the Word. And there are groups that fall somewhere in between.

We, as a church, are learning and growing together in this pursuit of Jesus Christ. The groups that are meeting now are each somewhere on the path of pursuing Christ and understanding what it is to meet with Him and to experience His presence with them.

As we return to our Acts 2:41-47 passage, we will see how the early church focused their gatherings upon Jesus Christ, who promised to be with them whenever two or three of them gathered in His name.

Read Acts 2:41-47

How do we place Jesus in the midst of our *LIFEgroup*? How do we pursue a relationship with Jesus? Over the next three days we will be looking at this passage in Acts and surveying some Christ-centered disciplines that were part of the early church.

They were devoted

The first thing we see is that the early believers were **devoted**. The word means "to hold fast, continue, persevere, to be faithful." In other words, these disciples went after Jesus with a passion. They

were not casual about their faith in Christ. They were not lackadaisical, indifferent, or haphazard in their commitment to meet together to learn what it was to abide in Jesus Christ, their long-awaited Savior and Messiah. They were devoted to knowing Christ and being the Body of Christ to one another. Devotion is the attitude that characterized their pursuit of Christ.

For us today, without a heart devoted to a passionate and intentional pursuit of Christ, there will not be the dynamic of the presence of Christ that the early church experienced. In the next section we will begin our look at four specific ways the early believers were devoted to pursuing Christ in their small groups.

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.



Christ-Centered Disciplines, Part 1

1. The Early Believers Were Devoted to the Apostles' Teaching

This was done in a large group. According to Acts 2:46a, they would gather in the temple courts to hear the Apostles' teaching. In Acts 5:42 we also see that the Apostles taught from house-to-house, probably referring to the house churches.

1 Peter 2:2
Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation

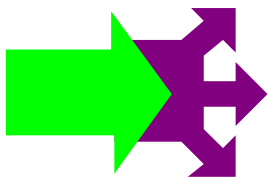
The Apostles were the walking New Testament because it had not yet been written. They were the ones who brought the Word of God to the church. The Apostles' teaching was the teaching of the Word of God and how it applied to the lives of believers.

In their small groups, they would discuss the Apostles' teaching and wrestle with what it meant to apply it to their lives. They would ask questions like, "What does this mean?" or "What are we to do about this?" The application to their lives was critical because the promises of the Old Testament were not being fulfilled in the way they expected.

They expected an earthly King who would rescue them from the dictatorship of the Romans. They were looking for a political, national deliverance and they did not get it. This was not what they expected.

They got a heavenly King Who rescued them from their sins and told them to live as His ambassadors in the midst of an oppressive government.

They needed to know how to apply what they were learning. And things have not changed for us today!



"Tony was in a Bible study group but he was frustrated. He felt as though he was not growing. Their group had a great teacher who knew the Bible well and could tell them all sorts of important information about what it

said and what it meant. Their group met once a week in the home of the teacher. But Tony, after two years in the group, realized they never talked about everyday life. Additionally, there was little discussion and, every time he asked a question, he felt that the teacher discounted his concerns. Tony felt he wasn't a very spiritual person because he had so many questions. . . Tony was increasingly sad about being in the group and he was thinking of dropping out. As he thought about his hunger "to know" (the Word of God) he realized he wanted to be in a group where there was less teaching and more sharing about the real issues of life." (Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry, Icenogle, IVP)

How Does the Truth Apply to One's Everyday Life?

When Jesus taught, He told people the truth and then how it applied to their lives, so they would know how to live. He intended for people to take His Word and obey it— live it!



Small groups are a place where "real men and women have a safe place to deal with the hard questions of life. And in all the discussion and teaching, Jesus' life is pointed to as the center and source of the community." (Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry, Icenogle, IVP)

LIFEgroups are a place where the written Word is applied by the Living Word to the actual life situations of the people in that group.

2. The Early Believers Were devoted to the Fellowship

They were devoted to the community— to one another. The word "fellowship" in the New Testament is the word **koinonia**, which expresses what we have in common with one another *in* Christ, or what we share together. It is a partnership of faith in Christ, a living bond. It has the idea of family life together. A person cannot experience true "community" until they give *and* receive in the group.

This kind of fellowship did not exist prior to the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was sent to the church. The word is not even used in the Gospels.

Fellowship in essence means - "common" or "commonality". Therefore it refers to what we share! The Bible was not written in "Classical Greek" that was used only by the educated people, but in "Koine Greek" used in everyday life by common people. This root word is chosen to communicate fellowship based on holding all things in common.

So **koinonia** (fellowship) exists when we share with one another what we have in common. The common element in the early church was Jesus! This is why a tax collector could be in the same

group with zealots who hated tax collectors! Unity was not based on outward circumstances or personalities, but on the inward reality of Christ's presence in each life.

They were a new community because of their relationship with Christ. They were His Body, filled with His Spirit— they were "one" in Jesus. What they had in common, what they shared together, was this new life in Jesus Christ. They were devoted to being together as God's people.

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.

What Scripture or statement spoke to you today? _____

How can you apply this Scripture or thought to your life? _____



Christ-Centered Disciplines, Part 2

Counterfeit Forms of Fellowship

Sometimes we experience *superficial fellowship*. In this kind of fellowship, something other than Christ is our primary bond. It could be a peer group like high school, singles, young marrieds, older marrieds, etc. But is that enough to really bind us together? Or the thing that bonds the group together could be a ministry program or activity like, worship team, sports, choir, etc. Hobbies and other recreational activities can also bind people together like a car club,

1 Corinthians 1:9

"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."

computers, softball, etc. We must be on our guard because these things, though innocent in themselves, can become a Christ substitute or become more primary than Jesus.

There is also *counterfeit fellowship*. We are social,

relational beings. We become relationally sick if we are isolated without relationships.

So, among Christians and pre-Christians alike, there are social

gatherings, clubs, organizations, etc. These are not necessarily evil or wrong. However, for Christians, they can sometimes serve as a counterfeit fellowship. Whatever they have in common begins to fill that need that God created to be filled by Jesus. Their primary devotion of time, energy, money, relationships, etc. is to the club, job, gym, or hobby, and Christian community is secondary or even further down the list.



Take a moment to survey your relationships. Where are your most valued relationships located? _____

What gets the majority of :

- ❖ your time? _____
- ❖ your energy? _____
- ❖ your money? _____
- ❖ your relationships? _____

Where your most valued relationships are will be what wins focus in your life. God wants your primary relationships to be with His people and then with those outside the faith.

One reason these other forms of fellowship can win out is that the person may never have tasted true Christian community. He may have never been in a situation where believers gather together in a **LIFEgroup** around the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, and seek Him, worship Him, talk with Him, and live as the Body of Christ.

He may never have experienced people caring for one another and helping one another be joined to Christ.

The believers in the early church were committed to fellowship together around the life of Jesus. That kind of sharing is more than just a potluck or punch and cookies!

That kind of sharing is more than just a potluck or punch and cookies!

3. The Early Believers Were Also Devoted to the Breaking of Bread

This was usually done in small groups in homes. Jesus had said, "Do this in memory of Me." And they did! The early church often did this in one of two ways:

Bread and Cup Only:

They shared in the Lord's Supper together. They broke bread in memory of Jesus' body which was crucified on the cross for their sins. They also drank the cup in memory of Jesus' blood which was shed on the cross to bring a new relationship between God and all those who would believe.

The Love Feast:

They would start with bread and then share a meal. Then they would close with a cup. The whole time around the meal was spent focusing on Christ and what He was doing in their lives.

There is something very special about partaking of the Lord's Supper with a little community. You know one another and, therefore, know if the relationships between one another are right or not. There is a degree of transparency that cannot be shared in a large group gathering. There can also be public confession of sin, forgiveness requested and extended, prayer for one another, and oneness in Jesus truly experienced. During these times we need to focus on the forgiveness of Christ. His life paid the price for our sin.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.

What Scripture or statement spoke to you today?

Rewrite this Scripture or statement into a prayer request to God.____

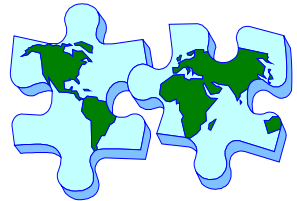
How can you apply this Scripture or thought to your life?_____



Christ-Centered Disciplines, Part 3

The Early Believers Were Devoted to Prayer

They prayed together as a little community for their unsaved family members and friends, for government leaders, for spiritual leaders, and for one another's needs. As you read through the book of Acts you will see that prayer marked the life of the early church:



1:14— prayed in the Upper Room for God's direction and ultimately were filled with the Holy Spirit

1:24— prayed for the selection of the one to replace Judas Iscariot

4:24, 31— praised God for the release of Peter and John from

prison and prayed for boldness and it was given to them

6:4— prayed God's anointing on the seven chosen as deacons

7:59— Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him to death

8:15— Peter and John prayed that the Samaritan believers would receive the Holy Spirit

9:40— Peter prayed and raised a woman from the dead

10:9— Peter prayed and God gave him a vision

12:5— Church prayed for Peter's release from prison and God sent an angel to free him

13:4— Church at Antioch fasted and prayed and laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off on the first missionary journey

14:23— Paul and Barnabas committed elders in newly formed churches to the Lord through fasting and prayer

16:25— Paul and Silas prayed in prison and the Lord sent an earthquake freeing them from their chains and leading to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family

22:17— Paul prayed and God gave him a message to leave Jerusalem

28:8— Paul prayed for a man with fever and dysentery and he was healed

The early believers brought everything to God because they believed nothing was too difficult for Him. Prayer was the key to the release of God's power and His mighty working among them. Notice in Acts 2:43 what followed the early believers devotion to the Apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer— **"Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles."**

Prayer is one of the missing ingredients in the American church today. This is one of the reasons we do not experience the sense of

awe the early believers did. Let's talk about prayer in our little communities.



When it is time to pray in our **LIFEgroups**, it is not so much a time to share prayer requests, but a time to pray for those requests. Often we spend so much time sharing our requests that there is little or no time left to actually pray for them. All we have accomplished is revealing needs, we have not released God's power to meet those needs. No wonder we are often so needy!

If we are praying in our groups as we should, each person is entering into the prayer of the one who is praying, sharing their burden, joining in their words with a prayer of agreement. The pray-er can say, "Lord, WE pray. . ." knowing that others are joining in their prayer. And, if you think they have not prayed aright, you can intercede silently for that brother or sister and talk to them later.

There are some habit patterns so deeply ingrained in our lives that hard work on our part is not going to take it away. It takes the healing of God that is born through confession of sin and the intercession of our brothers and sisters on our behalf. That will break the bond and bring the power of Christ into our midst.

In the early church, as the believers discussed the apostles' teaching, Jesus was the living Word in their midst. As they gathered in Jesus' name, He was the center and reason for their fellowship. When they observed the Lord's Supper, Jesus was remembered as they broke bread together. As they sought out the Lord together and poured out their hearts in prayer, Jesus heard and answered their needs because He was in their midst.

In seeking Jesus, the relationship was kindled. As the church met around Jesus, they were transformed. They became different people. They were marked by God.

The Dynamics of the Early Church

The awe that the early believers experienced was a result of the living presence of Christ in their midst. It resulted in:

God doing wonders and miraculous signs through the apostles—
Acts 2:43

The believers meeting one another's physical needs— Acts 2:46;
4:32-36

The citizens of Jerusalem highly regarded them, though they were
fearful of joining them— Acts 5:13

More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were
added to their number— Acts 5:14

Large numbers of people were healed— Acts 5:15, 16

You can't program these things!

The Witness of the Early Church

History records the life of the early church and how it was interpreted by those observing from the outside. The philosopher Aristides early in the second century had this to say to the king in regard to the reputation of the early church:

"Now the Christians, O King, by going about and seeking, have found the truth. For they know and trust in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who has no fellow. From him they received those commandments which they have engraved on their minds, and which they observe in the hope and expectation of the world to come.



For this reason they do not commit adultery or immorality; they do not bear false witness, or embezzle, nor do they covet what is not theirs. They honor father and mother, and do good to those who are their neighbors. Whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols made in the image of man. Whatever they do not wish that others should do to them, they in turn do not do; and they do not eat the food sacrificed to idols.

Those who oppress them they exhort and make them their friends. They do good to their enemies. Their wives, O King, are pure as

virgins, and their daughters are modest. Their men abstain from all unlawful sexual contact and from impurity, in the hope of recompense that is to come in another world.

As for their bondmen and bondwomen, and their children, if there are any, they persuade them to become Christians; and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction.

They refuse to worship strange gods; and they go their way in all humility and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them. They love one another; the widow's needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God.

When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free.

If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities. They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, living honestly and soberly as the Lord their God ordered them. Every morning and every hour they praise and thank God for his goodness to them; and for their food and drink they offer thanksgiving.

If any righteous person of their number passes away from the world, they rejoice and thank God, and escort his body as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby. When a child is born to one of them, they praise God. If it dies in infancy, they thank God the more, as for one



who has passed through the world without sins. But if one of them dies in his iniquity or in his sins, they grieve bitterly and sorrow as over one who is about to meet his doom.

Such, O King, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct." (*The Apology of Aristides*, translated by Rendel Harris [London: Cambridge, 1893])

No wonder people were added to their number daily. Who would not want to join a church like that?

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.

What Scripture or statement spoke to you today?

Rewrite this Scripture or statement into a prayer request to God. _____

How can you apply this Scripture or thought to your life? _____

WEEK

5

Community Is for Sharing

DAY 1

God Blesses Us So We Can Share with Others

For the past four weeks we have been growing in our understanding of living in little communities, where we come together to meet with Jesus, and where we are the living Body of Christ to one another. One of the results of meeting in that way is that the love of Jesus flows through our lives to others.

We are once again going to return to our passage in Acts 2:42-47. Something powerful was happening in Jerusalem. It was powerful, awesome, and wonderful, not only to those who were a part of the church but also to those who were on the outside looking in.

Read Acts 2:42-47

Notice the end of verse 47: **"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."**

What were the people of Jerusalem seeing that drew them to the Lord and to His church?

1. They saw the believers caring for one another in an awesome and unusual way. They were meeting one another's physical needs for food, clothing, shelter, etc. You must remember that these were hardworking people just like us. Some of them were barely making it but they gave of what they had to meet the needs of those who were



less fortunate.

How did those who were not part of the church know this? Remember, people talk. They had friends who had been in need and had their needs met. They asked them what happened and the friends told them what the church had done for them. Their response may have been, "I have never seen anything like this. Let's see if it lasts."

We have seen the same kind of thing happen today as members of home groups jump in to meet the need of a group member or someone outside the group. Realize this is not the natural response of people today. And again, people talk. They will see a friend who asks them how they are doing and they can share how some people in their home group pitched in to meet a need in their lives. This is guaranteed to get the attention of outsiders. Well, what else did the people of Jerusalem see in the early church?

2. The believers were together in the temple courts and in homes. **46 "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together. . ."** They seemed to enjoy meeting together. There was excitement when they met.

3. The believers were together in harmony and love: **46 ". . .with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God. . ."** They wanted to be together around Jesus. They loved one another with genuine hearts that overflowed with joy. This was not a duty or an obligation with them. Their singing was warm and from their hearts.

What the people in Jerusalem saw was believers in Jesus who were loving one another, meeting one another's needs in an extraordinary way, spending time together, eating together, worshipping together, and joyfully welcoming new people into their little communities. They saw people in a new community around Jesus. It was a wonder to behold.

The richness of the believers' community was bearing much fruit.

The richness of what the believers held in common drew others, who saw that something great and unusual was happening. The people started getting interested. They had been religious all their lives — really they had gone through the motions all their lives. They had believed in God — intellectually — all their lives. But something had changed and they were seeing before their eyes the living Body of Christ. They just did not know what it was. The richness of the believers' community was bearing much fruit.

If you came to faith in Christ as an adult, how much of what you saw in the lives of Christians piqued your curiosity about what the Christian life might hold for you? _____

Please explain:

Who were the Christians God used as an influence in your life? _____

What was there about their life that made Christianity seem appealing to you? _____

Whether we like it or not, our lives influence people in a positive or negative manner concerning the cause of Christ. People are watching us, all the time, to see if what we have is real and if it is something they would want for their life. If we are going to effectively reach our family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, classmates, etc. for the cause of Christ, we need live our lives in such a way that they will see what they are in for if they yield their life to Him.

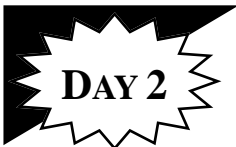
Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to

your life.

What Scripture or statement spoke to you today? _____

Rewrite this Scripture or statement into a prayer request to God.

How can you apply this Scripture or thought to your life? _____



A Lesson from the Soil

As I write this, my front lawn is nothing but dirt. The grass has been killed off, the faulty sprinkler system has been dug up and removed. New valves are being prepared for a preferable future. Our currently landscape theme is “early mars”, with generous compliments of unsightly trenches, rocks and barren terra firma.

Our next task is to half off boatloads of dirt. We realize that is we are going to have a lush deep green lawn, the primary determinant is healthy, fertile soil. So we will be hauling dirt, and replacing it with rich loam. Though it is not cheap, the investment will save us time and money in the future. With the right soil, it is easy to grow a green lawn. With the wrong soil, there is a constant battle to fertilize, and add amendments, and water to get rid of the brown spots.

Now, in the church, community life is the soil. It is the richness of community life that will determine the quality and quantity of the fruit that is produced—the effects in the lives of the people.



The soil in our little communities grows rich as a result of two things:

1. People meeting with and around Jesus, Who has promised to be with them as they gather in His name.
2. People loving one another as Jesus loved them— being the Body of Christ to one another.

In that kind of soil, Jesus is free to bear the quality and quantity of fruit He desires in our lives. He wants to transform our character, life and actions so those outside the faith can see the fruit and what we share with other believers and desire it for themselves. As Christ brings about change in our lives, He is able to use us to impact others for Himself.

This is what He promised in John 15:5 **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man *remains* in Me and I in him, he will bear *much fruit*; apart from Me you can do nothing."** If we remain or abide in Christ, He will transform us and provide fruit in quantity. In verse 16a He says, **"You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit— *fruit that will last.*"**

As Christ brings about change in our lives, He is able to use us to impact others for Himself.

The change Christ brings to your life lasts so the impact you make on others will also last. This speaks of the quality of the fruit He produces through us. The **LIFEgroup** is the hot house of spiritual growth when the soil is rich with the presence of Jesus and we are loving one another as we should.

Let's go back to the farm illustration for a moment. When you live in a farming community, even if you are not a farmer, you can tell how the field is producing and how diligent the farmer is when you drive by their field. You can tell simply by looking, seeing and examining. And the farmer gets a reputation based upon what people see.



When it comes to life, we are all involved. We are living it in and around others. We notice others and

they notice us. We can tell if someone is different. We see whether someone is kind or grouchy, self-centered or other-centered, demanding or giving, etc.

The same is true of those who watch us. When Christ is working in our life, He is doing things we sometimes do not even see. But those around us do. So when there is rich spiritual soil in our little communities, people notice.

We see the reality of this in Acts 3 and 4. Peter and John had just healed a crippled beggar and were preaching to the crowd who had witnessed the miracle. The religious leaders had them arrested, put in jail overnight, and brought the next day before the Sanhedrin for a hearing. Peter spoke boldly and rebuked the religious leaders and the court for crucifying Jesus. Their response is seen in Acts 4:13, "**When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.**"

When there is rich spiritual soil in our little communities, people notice.

They realized the disciples were uneducated, ordinary men, yet they had just healed a crippled beggar and spoke with amazing boldness. There was no natural explanation for this. They attributed it to the fact that these men had been with Jesus.

Do people living around you— family, friends, neighbors, classmates, co-workers— see evidence of the work of Christ in your life? _____ What do they see that is different about you?

What is happening in your life that can only be attributed to the work of Jesus in you, not something you can pull off in your own strength and knowledge?

How can we help one another experience lasting fruit (in the context of meeting in *LIFEgroups*)? _____



People's Response to the Work of Jesus in Our Lives

How Did the People of Jerusalem Respond When They Saw the Love Between the Believers?

The people held them in high regard. Acts 2:47 says the believers were "**enjoying the favor of all the people.**" The citizens of Jerusalem were caught up in the awe and reality of what God was doing in their midst. **Acts 5:12b ". . . And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. 13 No one else dared join them, (awe or fear) even though they were highly regarded by the people (favor and admiration). When Jesus is in your midst, people know it!**

There were large numbers of citizens who came to believe in Jesus as a result of seeing Him work in the lives of the believers. **Acts 5:14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." 2:47 ". . . And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."**

The citizens of Jerusalem were caught up in the awe and reality of what God was doing in their midst.

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus had told them this would happen. **John 13:35** **"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."** And these believers in Jerusalem were loving one another:



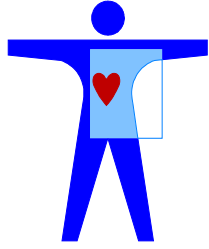
- ❖ If the need was physical, they met it. Their brothers and sisters in Christ were more important than the possessions they had accumulated.
- ❖ If there was a need for encouragement, they encouraged one another.
- ❖ If there was a need for caring, they cared.
- ❖ If there was a need for teaching, they taught.
- ❖ If there was a need for correction, they corrected in patience and in love.
- ❖ They were known for loving one another in their actions, words and attitudes.

What is The LIFEhouse Church Known For?

I have a dream. It is simple and it reflects what is at the center of Jesus' heart for His people. My dream is that one day, when people hear the name, The LIFEhouse Church, they would say, *"Those people really love each other."* It may not be those exact words, and Jesus told us that not everyone will always speak well of any church, but they will say things like:

- ❖ "They sure take care of their widows."
- ❖ "A single lady I work with needed her car fixed and some people from her church came over and took care of it for her."
- ❖ "A guy I got to know at the gym went into the hospital, and so, I went to see him. When I got to the door, I saw cards all over the wall and there were people from his church standing around his bed, holding his hands and praying for him. I just stood there and listened. I could tell they really cared about him."
- ❖ "My neighbor was out of work and they brought in food and helped him find a job."
- ❖ "Oh how they love one another!"

It is as we care for one another, helping one another plug into Jesus, that Jesus' prayer for us is fulfilled: **John 17:20** "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, 23 . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me."



Loving one another in little communities is what communicates to the world and convinces them that Jesus really came to earth and that He loves them. Corporate structures cannot do that. Buildings cannot do that. Love, given and received between believers living in little communities with Jesus and being His body to one another, is a beautiful thing to behold!

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.

What was your first impression of our church? _____

Why did you choose to return? _____

What is Our Church known for in the community? _____

Prayerfully ask God to glorify Himself through our church, and that our reputation in the community will enhance the building of the Kingdom of God.

Making This a Reality Right Where We Live

Our Beauty, as The Church, Should be More Than Skin Deep

People will determine whether following Jesus Christ is a valid option for their lives based upon what they see of Him in the lives of His people. You might feel that is unfair but most people form their opinions of organizations and people based upon their first contacts with them. But sometimes appearances can be deceiving. We have all run across a beautiful woman or a handsome man, who caught our eye by their attractiveness. But our real opinion of them is determined by what we find out about them as we get to know them better.

The church is described as a "**bride beautifully dressed for her husband**" in Revelation 21:2. She is attractive to those who see her. As unbelievers draw close, they will see if the church's beauty goes deeper than the surface.

- ❖ How do the people relate to one another?
- ❖ How do they talk about one another?
- ❖ How do they deal with their problems?
- ❖ Do they accept one another?
- ❖ Do they practice what they preach?
- ❖ Do they love one another?

Personal Applications

1. Pray for yourself and your group that you would grow in meeting with Christ and being the Body of Christ to one another.
2. Recognize that, when your life is characterized by meeting with Jesus in a **LIFEgroup** and then being the Body of Christ to one another, sharing your faith in Christ with others becomes a genuine overflow of that kind

People will determine whether following Jesus Christ is a valid option for their lives based upon what they see of Him in the lives of His people.

of living.

Sometimes You See a Need and Meet It.

It may be a physical need like preparing a meal for a family whose wife and mother is in the hospital. It could be an emotional need like offering warmth and encouragement for someone who has just lost a loved one. It might be befriending the new person moving into your neighborhood, your classroom or your workplace.

We are surrounded by needy people every day. Jesus can meet their needs. Rather than praying and asking God to give us opportunities to love others, we need to ask Him to open our eyes to see the needs that already surround us. We just need to live with Him in our little communities and He will be able to flow out of our lives to meet the needs of people He brings our way.

Sometimes God Opens a Door and Calls You to Speak.

When the time for speaking comes, it grows out of abiding in the presence of Jesus. Let's look again at Acts 4:13 **"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."** Peter and John's confidence was not in their education or experience, it was in Jesus.

The Word "unschooled" here speaks of men who were uneducated, lacking in experience concerning the law, illiterate. The word "ordinary" means an amateur or one who was untrained. Peter and John were from Galilee and were now living in the city of Jerusalem. They were the equivalent of the Beverly Hillbillies in their day. But they did not let that stop them. Their confidence grew out of their being with Jesus.

Sometimes the words God calls us to speak are "Come and see." Other times they may be sharing something Christ has done in your life that very week. There may be times when we will have to answer questions that unbelievers may have. Peter challenges us in **1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you**

have."

Sometimes God Calls Us to a Group Effort.

Sometimes God will lead the group to do something together, like taking food to a needy neighbor, helping a disabled person paint their home or clean up their yard, etc.

Look back through today's lesson. Pray and ask God to identify one or more ideas He wants you to understand, learn or apply to your life.

What Scripture or statement spoke to you today?

Rewrite this Scripture or statement into a prayer request to God. ____

How can you apply this Scripture or thought to your life? _____





DAY 5

Catching a Vision for Little Communities

Sometimes when we talk about sharing Jesus' love with those who do not yet know Christ, people say, "Sure, but what about me? Here you are so concerned about bringing others into the church and I need help. What about me?"

If you feel that way, you need to experience having your needs met through a little community. Just like the song, "In This Very Room", "In this very room, there's quite enough love for everyone." Jesus' love does not run out, it is never exhausted. There is quite enough love for you too. But, you must become vulnerable enough to let your needs be known.

In his book, Who Speaks for God?, Chuck Colson tells of a New York bishop who announced "AIDS is *not* God's judgment on the homosexual community" while he was addressing a gay rights demonstration. The next day a predictable response came from conservative church leaders: "AIDS *is* God's judgment on homosexuals."

Writes Colson:

"The debate raises a timely question: Who does speak for God? Ironically, while the bishop and his conservative challengers were pontificating over who was responsible for AIDS, I discovered that a young woman on my staff named Christy was using her evenings and weekends to do something about it.

"At a time when most Americans were panic-stricken over the contagious disease or snickering at snide AIDS jokes, Christy and her prayer group (her little community) were visiting terminally ill AIDS patients at a Washington area hospital. None of the men had families in the area, and certainly no visitors. So Christy's group brought them postage stamps, stationery, books, tapes and cookies.

In a prayer memo, Christy explained why she visited AIDS victims: "They are socially unacceptable because of their lifestyle

and medically unacceptable because of their diseases. They are scared. They are dying. They are unsaved.' She continued, 'We have been able to pray with eight of the patients. Two men who died in the last ten days received Christ. . .'"

Christy and her friends remind us of a great truth: The quiet, often unnoticed, actions of "ordinary" Christians, who believe and obey, speak far more loudly than all the talk of so-called religious leaders. Who speaks for God? He does quite nicely for Himself—through His holy and infallible Word and the quiet obedience of His servants.

"The quiet, often unnoticed, actions of "ordinary" Christians, who believe and obey, speak far more loudly than all the talk of so-called religious leaders."

One Final Illustration

In the war years, triage (sorting out) referred to the policy by which medical assistance was given. It was up to the doctors to "color tag" the wounded, placing them in one of three categories according to their condition. One color meant hopeless— nothing we can do will save them. Another tag meant they would make it whether they got help or not. The third colored tag indicated a doubtful prognosis— a chance to live only if medical assistance was given.



Since there were severely limited medical supplies, . . . assistance was being given only to this last group. Lou was badly blown apart, including one leg which was severely wounded. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lou was a hopeless case and tagged him as such, leaving him to die. But a nurse noticed Lou was conscious and began to talk with him. They discovered they were both from

Ohio. Getting to know Lou as a person, the nurse just could not let him die. She broke all the rules and changed his color tag. There followed a two-day trip in the back of a truck and months in a hospital. But Lou made it. He met a girl in the hospital who later became his wife.

Even minus one leg he has led a full and happy life, all because a nurse broke the rules of triage and changed a tag. Maybe the task of the church is going around changing people's tags. Maybe that is what Jesus meant to tell us when He touched the leper. Perhaps our clearest lifestyle call is to be with outcasts and the ones society has labeled "hopeless." (From John and Mary Schramm, in Things that Make for Peace.)

My sincere prayer for your life is that, if you are not already in a **LIFEgroup**, you would become a part of one right away. Open your life to be loved and to love your brothers and sisters in Christ. If you are currently in a **LIFEgroup**, pray and ask the Lord how He would use you to meet the needs of those already in your group and how He would use your group to change the tags of the "hopeless" people who live all around you. Ask God to direct you to someone who is in need of the love of God, and the experience of living in a "little community in the Kingdom of God".

Who's tag needs to be changed? _____

Write a prayer expressing your heart for the lost, and your desire to open Jesus by spreading His love to those who do not yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior. _____

Notes



Pastor Stan Lubeck
The LIFEhouse Church
2008