

## Sermon-Based Small Groups

### Making Disciples in Small Groups with Expository Preaching

By Alan Stoddard  
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What is my story with sermon-based small groups?

On July 27, 2017, our world lost a legend. It was on that day Haddon Robinson stepped into eternity. I was blessed to study with Dr. Robinson at Gordon-Conwell in the Doctor of Ministry program. I just wanted to study with Haddon Robinson. I did not really care about another degree. As I finished the last seminar in 2008, I was demoralized. I was the only student in my cohort not to get the dissertation proposal approved. I got on the plane ready to fly back home ready to quit, but that did not sit well with me. I was caught in the tension of quitting and moving on with ministry and the tension of being a quitter.

When we got up to 30K feet, I was reading a book called “Simple Church.” The book was about simplifying ministry by doing less to accomplish more. As I was reading I experienced a revival. I read about how a pastor was using sermon-based groups to reinforce expository preaching. It was just a sliver of the content in the book, but it spoke to me as if God allowed me to discover gold while on high. I wondered to myself, “could I write something on this topic?”

Little did I know how 15 years later this topic and strategy would be producing fruit. I got up the next day. I shook off the cobwebs of travel and Googled “sermon-based small groups.” The rest is history. My ministry strategy changed. I wrote a dissertation on “reinforcing expository preaching with sermon based small groups.” I graduated. My dissertation has produced much fruit. It is really good when you can live your work.

#### **Why should you use sermon-based small groups?**

If I told you that only 1 in 10 newer, younger believers get disciplined after crossing the line of faith, what would your response be? Take the poll in any room of Christians and it will prove true. One of the laser beam focuses we need to have these days is disciple making. And one of the ways new believers need to be disciplined is to get them into healthy small groups.

The problem with many group strategies is the groups within the strategies are not healthy groups. It's the quickest way to disciple people.

Why should you use sermon-based small groups? There are a few reasons, but the main one is to make disciples. In today's church world there are many definitions of disciple making. Yet if we at least use the imagery and meaning found in Jesus and the twelve, we can see small groups are where He disciplined. He took 12-20 people for 3 years and poured Himself into them.

If that is true, and in light of pandemic realities that could surface again, should we not focus on equipping people to know how to be disciples in small groups? Yet we will keep that focus

tethered to the local church through preaching. Why should you consider sermon-based small groups? They are the best way for pastors to make disciples from the pulpit to the pew.

### **Are sermon-based small groups biblical?**

As I started writing about sermon-based small groups I fought the desire to rush and finish a degree and to go slow and learn at the doctoral level. I sent in my second chapter to Haddon Robinson hoping to start on the third chapter. The problem is I got to my mailbox only to find my second chapter bleeding red. Most of the red was easy to fix, but one glaring question blared out from Haddon: “is what you are saying about sermon-based small groups found in the Bible?”

That was embarrassingly frustrating. I was embarrassed because I did not think to look at it like that. I was frustrated because my quick approach to getting done just came to an abrupt stop.

I quickly opened my Bible. The first passage I knew off the top of my head to footnote this was the parable of the sower. Jesus told the parable to the crowd, but took the disciples aside to explain the parable just to them. Jesus repeated this often for 3 years. I skimmed Acts with a fine tooth comb. There were more than a few examples of public teaching in the synagogue that ended up in a living room. The more famous example has to be when Paul taught the word and preached the gospel publicly in the synagogue of Berea only to have some of the Bereans afterward, “eagerly . . . examining the scriptures carefully everyday to see if these things were so.”

I sent the chapter back to Robinson. He was pleased with the research I did. So, you may ask: “Are sermon-based small groups biblical?” They are biblical and are evidence of having a Great Commission focus. These groups – like in the early church – do not change the topic. These groups drill straight down on the topic preached on a Sunday.

Sermon-based small groups are a church unifying strategy to make disciples around the preaching ministry of the church.

### **Sermon-based small groups create a place for life change**

Let there be no doubt that God alone brings transformation. Yet how does He do it? He transforms internally by the power of the gospel applied to the heart. Life change happens from the inside out. Yet we have realized the external expression of faith is crucial to spiritual growth. The best expression of spiritual growth is found in a small group of disciples growing together. There is a challenge to discipleship.

The challenge to discipleship that sermon-based small groups answer is found in the Edgar Dale Cone of Learning. Most people do not know that name but they do recognize the often quoted list. People remember . . .

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they see and hear (passive learning ends here and active learning begins)
- 70% of what they discuss
- 80% of what they do

- 90% of what they teach

Notice a couple of things. First, for us teachers and preachers, it can be a little demoralizing to think of the small percentages of people not remembering our messages. Also, notice in the list above where active learning does not start until people discuss ideas. Do we want passive learning or active learning? I think we would all say we know we need both. Yet we often lean heavily on the passive content delivery aspects of preaching while not paying much attention at all to the active learning aspects. If active learning doesn't start until discussion happens, then we need to get people talking. About what? The Bible. What is the best vehicle for that discussion? The pastor's text from Sunday wrapped around some well-written questions in a group led by a disciple-making leader.

### **What churches are using sermon-based small groups effectively?**

Many churches have used sermon-based small groups. One church that uses sermon-based small groups effectively and equips other churches to use them is North Coast Church, led by Chris Brown and Larry Osborne. North Coast boasts a 90% Sunday morning attendance in small groups when measured each October. Calvary Albuquerque with Skip Heitzig has been known to use sermon-based small groups. Francis Chan used them when he was at Cornerstone Church.

Many church plants in the last ten years utilize sermon-based small groups. Why? These groups are easier to manage because the pastor is the first teacher. The pastor is the main driver of discipleship in this strategy. These groups provide a synergy around the Sunday morning worship experience that is efficient and effective.

### **A strategic plan for implementing sermon-based small groups**

- 1. Make the decision.** Decide to drive disciple making through sermon-based small groups in the church you serve.
- 2. Set a date to start.** Make the decision to implement a semester strategy. Which semester will you start with: fall, winter, spring? (Summer is not an option).
- 3. Plan the sermon series.** Make the first series fit closely to the first semester calendar. Matching exactly is not required but is wise for the first launch. Wrap your sermon-based small groups launch around a series that will engage and disciple people.
- 4. Select SBSG leaders.** Make prayerful, personal selections.
  - character
  - chemistry
  - competent
  - calling
- 5. Disciple leaders.** Pastors should meet with small group leaders monthly for fellowship, encouragement, and equipping. This will be a game changer. Send out a weekly seven-minute video equipping and encouraging small group leaders.
- 6. Select a writing team.** The pastor can write the questions. He has a few already from his preparation. If a church has a staff, they could be required to write questions and cross

references. Churches probably have gifted writer(s) who would be willing to be on a rotating team that writes questions.

**7. Set deadlines.** The more you plan ahead the easier the weekly plan becomes. This makes preaching and disciple making effective and efficient in the disciple making process. When will the questions be written? It is best to work weeks ahead on a majority of the sermon-based small group notes. That allows for polishing, loading, and distributing the week of their use. When will they be turned into a pdf? These should be loaded for public use on the web Sunday night or Monday morning after the sermon is preached. Small group leaders should get them two weeks out. Who will do these things? A church administrative assistant could and should do this if a church has that margin.

**8. Make structural adjustments.** Think through and decide the strategy that fits your current structure. If you have a Sunday school model, how do you use sermon-based small groups? We live in a hybrid culture. You can and should use both. There is much more to that strategy that can be addressed in a single article. I can say this: if a church with an on campus structure is not using off campus groups at this point in our culture, that church is missing an opportunity.

### **What will you do?**

I like to say to pastors: “You worked 10-20 hours on your Sunday morning message. Why would you change topics in small groups? Why not keep the momentum of Sunday going in a small group on Tuesday? Or Wednesday?”

If I can serve you in any way, reach out. I would love to come alongside you to make sermon-based small groups happen in the church you serve. Contact me at [vision419@gmail.com](mailto:vision419@gmail.com) or through [www.twitter.com/alan\\_stoddard](https://www.twitter.com/alan_stoddard).

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