

Bible Study Commentary

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Bible study home groups are common, particularly in Protestant churches. A recent study of Evangelical Protestant churches in Canada found that 96% held Bible studies at some point in the previous year. It is the most common church-sponsored activity outside of the main worship service. Wuthnow claims that 40% of Americans are involved in small groups, many in religious contexts. Other scholars have noted its international scope, in that Bible study groups, sometimes called “cell groups”, meet all over the world. For example, the Yoido Full Gospel church in Seoul, Korea, is the largest church in the world which claims over 800,000 members. It is based on the “cell church” model. In this model, the backbone of the church is its evangelistic and discipleship-oriented small groups. The work of the church is done primarily through the thousands of small groups that meet weekly. Bible study groups like the one pictured here are not only used to equip or encourage the faithful, but also to reach out to the unconverted as an evangelistic tool.

Why is Bible study so important to some churches? First, Protestant churches historically separated from the Catholic Church partly because of their commitment to the sole (or final) authority of the Bible. The Pope or church tradition did not trump what the Bible taught. Second, in many Protestant churches, lay persons are to read the Bible for themselves to strengthen their personal relationship with God. One need not go through the priest to connect with God. This does not mean that the believer should study the Bible in isolation, however. Instead, the local congregation is to encourage religious practice and piety by encouraging devotional practices like Bible reading and study, and believers are to gain understanding about the Bible through discussion and listening to sermons. For these reasons, Bible study and prayer are the foundations for spiritual growth in some churches.

Outside of theological reasons, researchers of religion have other explanations for the significance of small groups. Since home Bible study groups bring together a religiously homogenous group, commitments and beliefs are naturally reinforced by co-religionists. This increases similarity within a religious group and strengthens within-group bonds. Often, sharing within the group is personal and affective, further strengthening emotional connections and relational ties. This can also strengthen religious identity and boundaries, meaning that a person’s sense of belonging to the group becomes stronger while ties to external networks are weakened. If such social dynamics lead to greater commitment to the church and its purposes, then the church benefits from increased lay contributions, like volunteering or giving. In addition, such home groups can promote religious experiences. Prayer times together can be moving, and participants may sense the presence of the divine. Participants may feel that God is speaking to them directly through their Bible reading. Group members can also help interpret

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private experiences (for example, whether a dream has spiritual meaning), providing them with religious meaning or significance. Research clearly shows that both religious experience (often fostered in such settings) and embeddedness within religious institutions strengthens religious commitment.

In a society where people interact with smartphones and computers, home groups provide the personal touch of face-to-face interactions. They are safe environments where individuals receive support and encouragement, a relief from the impersonal and competitive business world. Home groups help religious people find “sharedness”, places where their faith journeys intersect with the journeys of others. Such home groups provide spiritual “homes” for many.