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Title: The Discipleship Gene: Connecting
Date: September 15 & 16, 2018
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Scripture: [1 Thessalonians 2:9-14a](#)
Text: [Acts 2:42-47](#)
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Let's start with a quiz. What do the following words have in common? Zeal, pride, mischief, and lounge. Anybody know? I'll give you hint. They are connected to tower, crash and prickle. Still don't know? I'll make it easier. Colony, swarm and pack. Now you know. They are the names of groups of animals.

A group of zebras is a zeal, lions a pride, mice a mischief. Lounge... anybody want to guess about lounge? Lizard! Really. A group of lizards is a lounge of lizards, not a lounge lizard, which is an entirely different thing. A group of giraffes' is called a tower. That makes sense as does a crash which is a group of rhinoceroses. Of course, you know that bats live in a colony, bees a swarm and a group of dogs is a pack. So what do you call a congregation? Alligators. ¹ A group of alligators is called a congregation even though you thought you were a congregation. But of course you are. A group of disciples is a congregation. Underscore group.

Just like God created those animals to be connected in a group, followers of Jesus also possess the group gene. God never intended you to live the Christian life alone. God wants disciples to connect in groups.

This is the second in our fall series on discipleship. Each year we look at the genetic make-up of faithful followers of Jesus. Last week the theme was gathering. We gather in worship at God's gracious invitation, responding with a command performance. You aren't here to be entertained. You aren't the audience. In worship, we perform for God, offering our praise and thanksgiving to a holy Audience of One. When we do so, we are "encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25b)

Encouragement is also part of today's theme of connecting, the second discipleship gene. Christianity is not a solo sport. It's about building strong,

healthy relationships with other followers of Jesus. In those relationship you can deepen your understanding of God's Word and experience in encouragement through fellowship and prayer. We have a picture of this in the early days of the church's formation. The snapshot comes immediately following the explosive experience of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit descended, a small group of followers became a congregation of more than 3000 people. We learn how this large congregation functioned. Acts says:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2;42-47)

Did you catch where most of the connection was going on? In homes, which by its very nature, requires small groups. There wasn't then and isn't now a home where 3000 people gather. One of the first things they do is start a connections ministry, forming small groups and meeting together in homes for study and fellowship.

It's not surprising that they did this because they saw Jesus do it. He starts his ministry by forming a group of twelve who surrounded him throughout his three year ministry. They connect with Jesus and each another. They listened to Jesus teach, devoting themselves to His understanding of the Word. They experienced the power of encouragement and watched his first commitment to prayer. Because Jesus modeled this group behavior, it became part of their genetic make-up. So naturally, they implement it at Pentecost. They don't just get spiritually excited by the Holy Spirit. They connect with one another to be spiritually transformed.

That is the first purpose of connecting: spiritual transformation. Acts describes this as happening as they "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching..." Since the Bible wasn't the Bible in the first century, the apostle's teaching was study of sacred documents which would become the Old Testament and the first hand testimonies about Jesus from the apostles. But the purpose was the same, to be spiritually transformed, to become more like Jesus. The spiritual growth of a believer was from the very beginning the natural result of connecting with God's word in Christian community. Groups, not individuals discovered the life-changing presence of

God in study of God's Word.² They weren't transformed in gathering; it happened in connecting.

They knew what some don't. Belief in Jesus and gathering in worship isn't sufficient to transform your life. In fact, this is so well known that it even has a label, it's called the "sanctification gap." Study after study reveals that Christian belief alone doesn't lead to demonstrably different behavior. The behavior of those who only go to church compared to people who never attend, isn't very different. Dallas Willard pointed this out decades ago when he wrote:

"We've counted on preaching and teaching to form faith. But for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians that well may be spiritually prepared to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less others."³ It may be truer today. He's pointing to the gap between hearing God's Word in worship and allowing it to transform you into more Christ like behavior in study.

How does spiritual transformation happen? A complete answer would need to highlight the grace of God working in you through the ministry of the Holy Spirit before God's Word. But it would include in the presence of others. We change by connecting with others who can help us see ourselves, who coach us, who we can imitate, who push us and love us and call out the best in us. Throughout scripture, we see this power of connecting in Bible study as a way to transform lives. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). When we connect with God's word, it works on us and it changes us. That was God's plan for us from the outset. From the very beginning of time, God's desire for you wasn't that you'd make it to heaven; it was that you'd be like Christ. God's divine intention for humanity is transforming us into the likeness of Jesus. Or as Paul says, we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . ." (Romans 8:29b)⁴ That spiritual transformation of a person into the likeness of Jesus takes place in Christian community. That's the first benefit of connecting.

The second is koinonia. That word is a winner. Do you know it? Better yet, do you know how to spell it? If you don't you aren't as smart as a 14 year old. Koinonia was the winning word that Karthik Nemmani spelled in the 2018 Scripts National Spelling bee, granting him the title champion. He asked for a definition of koinonia and this is what he got. "A Greek word defined as 'spiritual community,' it is better known to believers as a term

used to refer to Christian fellowship, or communion itself."⁵ I would have added, an essential part of the connecting gene.

Koinonia is translated fellowship in this little verse, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and (koinonia) fellowship" (Acts 2:42). Koinonia comes from the root word "koinos" which means common. Koinonia bears witness to what we have in common and what we share when we connect with other Christians. What do Christians have in common? Our relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The apostle John begins his first letter saying, our koinonia, "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3). But koinonia also bears witness in the outward expression of care and generosity we have for each other. In fact, the adjective form of koinonia is "koinonikos" which means generosity and that is the very description of the small groups after Pentecost. They spent much time together, meeting in homes, breaking bread and offering prayers, "with glad and generous hearts" they had the "goodwill of all people."

Again, this behavior was modeled by Jesus so they implement it as they launch the church. Table fellowship and prayer, the encouragement and support of koinonia were the hallmarks of Jesus small group life. Everything Jesus taught was based on this relational, communal care "goodwill of all people." Think about how Jesus challenges us to act. We are to love one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens, wash one another's feet, respect one another, forgive one another, comfort one another, pray for one another, confess our sins to one another, and be hospitable towards one another. Every one of these commands requires that we connect with each other.

It is how we offer support. If you are somebody who never has problems, never makes mistakes, never has difficult decisions to make, never needs a helping hand, then I guess you don't need the support of a group. But if life can occasionally be hard, if you mess up, if ever now and then you have a problem that you have to face, or if you need help once in a while, then having a group helps you deal with the challenges that we face in life. Plus the Bible tells us that we are to "...provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25) We aren't just to get support. We are to offer it. The connecting discipleship gene does all these things. It is about fellowship even as it is also about spiritual transformation.

As you came into worship today, you found in your bulletin a list of the many groups and classes we have. They are opportunities to connect. I hope if you haven't found your group in this community, you look for one. If you don't

see your place, then let us know of your interest on your card or through the connect email. We help you find a place.

You need to connect because that's the way you were designed by God. Just like God created those animals to be connected in a group, followers of Jesus are to be connected too. God never intended you to live the Christian life alone. God wants disciples to connect in groups because there is more to the Christian life than just believing. It's important to belong.

Find a place. Use is as a type gene therapy, as a way to embrace the discipleship gene of connecting.

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/odd-names-for-groups-of-animals-2016-3#a-cauldron-of-bats-3>

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross and New Creation*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 196.

³ Willard, Dallas. *Spiritual Formations in Christ.*"

⁴ Bolsinger, Tod E.. *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (p. 26). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/june/koinonia-scripps-spelling-bee-winning-word-christians.html>