

## Relationship with Church<sup>1</sup>

Ed O'Connor October 2015

What is the relationship between a Bible study group and the church that most of the members attend? How much control should the church have over the Bible study group?

In the late 1970s I was playing a lot of tennis and the captain of my team invited me to a Bible study group. When I arrived at the meeting there were about a dozen people, all about my age, male and female, and most of them were going to the same "low" Anglican church. They invited me to their church but, at the time, I had more interesting things to do on Sundays so I declined. Years later I went there regularly.

As far as I could see their church didn't try to control this Bible study group. We decided what we wanted to study. A different person led the study each week. (Everyone had the opportunity to lead a study if they wanted to.) We met at different homes, never at the church building. Sometimes we studied a book of the Bible. Sometimes we studied a popular Christian book (we worked through Knowing God by J.I.Packer chapter by chapter.) Sometimes we did topics that each leader selected. Never did their church suggest we study a booklet that they had written or recommended. We used to have a meal together before the study. Usually the person who lived at the home we were visiting would cook the meal, someone else would bring dessert and someone else would lead the study. We had a great time together. Personally, it re-kindled my passion for God: something that had faded since my youth group days.

I was with this Bible study group for about 5 years and only twice did a minister sit in with us. One minister was quite interesting but the other was deadly dull as he tried to explain the poetic metre of one of the psalms. The church never tried to guide us in any way, which I think now was a good thing. As far as I knew no-one went off the rails or joined a sect or became a heretic. The ministerial visits were a minimal attempt to check on how we were going.

Other churches weren't so easy going with their Bible study groups. For me, it wasn't until the 1990s that I came across the system of distributing booklets, written by one of the ministers, to be studied by all the Bible study groups, and each study was on the same text that was preached in the Sunday sermon. I got the impression that this system was well entrenched when my wife and I started going to this particular church. There were two main reactions to this system. One was that it was a good thing because going over the same material twice helped us remember it and if we didn't understand anything the minister would put us right in his sermon. The other reaction was that this is boring. We've already studied this stuff, why do we need to go over it all again? We could learn twice as much if the sermon and Bible studies were on different things.

This system also involved manipulating the studies and sermons to fit nicely into each school term. If the book of the Bible we were studying didn't quite fit in with the schedule then chapters of the Bible were bypassed. They did this at the church I was attending and, at the same time, banged on about the value of the Word of God!

Larry Osborne has a different way of looking at this method: "It's often assumed that with sermon-based small groups, every sermon series has to be juggled to coincide with the beginning and ending of a small group session. Not so. Over the years, lots of pastors have told me that they love the idea of sermon-based small groups but can't imagine trying to synchronize every sermon series with a small group calendar. This is especially true of those who are committed to an expositional journey through books of the Bible. They want passages to speak for themselves, and they feel it would be unfaithful to the text to truncate a sermon series, or stretch it out an extra three weeks, just to dovetail with the start or ending of a small group. . . . If the real power for deeper relationships and spiritual growth is found in the *process* of spending time together grappling with the implications of the previous weekend's sermon and text, it doesn't matter all that much which sermon it is or where it fits in any given series." Larry Osborne in Sticky Church (pages 113 to 114)

At first, distribution of booklets and encouragement to join groups were the only controls this particular church exerted over their Bible study groups. I don't know how many other churches did this but I expect it was common. What follows applies to my own experience and may not be relevant to other churches. Later the ministers made half-hearted attempts to train Bible study leaders but it wasn't much more than one meeting a term to tell 30 odd Bible study leaders what the ministers had already decided we were going to be studying.

Again my experience was that the Bible study booklets got dumbed down to cater for the lowest common denominator. This coincided with the sermons being dumbed down too. If leaders objected they were told they didn't have to use all the questions in each study and could make up their own or even use another booklet. But generally leaders followed the set booklet. Sometimes group members would object if the leader didn't ask all the set questions. For leaders who were also full time workers it was a lot easier to follow the booklet, which required minimal preparation, than to do something original and creative. Often the booklets were like primary school comprehension questions with nothing that provoked much thought or enquiry. I could see us slowly slipping into mediocrity.

I think the ministers wanted to control their Bible study groups but didn't want to do much work in assisting leaders or attending groups. The church I went to had 40 Bible study groups with about 12 members attending each week. It meant a lot of work for ministers to train 40 Bible study leaders. They could have allowed some of the more able Bible study leaders to do the training but that would mean releasing some of their control, which was the last thing they wanted to do. My impression was that ministers were more concerned with what happened in the Sunday services where they could be seen doing stuff.

Should the conventional church have a controlling relationship with their Bible study groups?

The Holy Spirit is often forgotten when it comes to who is in control. Ministers who try to control groups may say that they are guided by the Spirit but then group members are guided by the Spirit just as effectively. For all Larry Osborne's enthusiasm for Bible study groups (in his book Sticky Church) he is very high-control with "covenants" to be signed by each group member, end of quarter evaluation forms, responsibility lists that people have to agree to before they can lead or host a group, insistence that members listen to the sermon and answer the questions before they attend the group etc. Maybe some people like to have those sorts of constraints.

Personally, I like the idea of group members taking responsibility and control for their own group. Once the group is formed I think churches should stay out of it. I suggest we let the members use their own God given skills, leadership, creativity, intuition and wisdom and with God's help they will grow.

1. What I mean by church is that organisation you go to, usually on a Sunday, where you sing hymns or songs, someone reads from the Bible, someone preaches for about 30 mins, someone prays etc. – you get the idea. If "church" is a gathering of Christians (= *ekklesia*) then what we do in a Bible study group is also church but in common language it's not described that way. For the purpose of this document I will make the distinction by using "church" and "Bible study group" as completely different things.