



The mission of God is to restore all things to himself in and through the work and person of Jesus Christ. His chosen vehicle through which he is accomplishing that mission is the church. The church is the family of God called to together to himself and sent out on his mission. REALife Groups are the primary means through which Hill Country mobilizes people together on mission and connects people to a caring community.

A REALife Group is a gospel community that lives out the mission of God together in a specific area and to a particular people group by demonstrating the gospel in tangible forms and declaring the gospel to others - both those who believe it and those who are being exposed to it.

A REALife Group is not primarily:

- A Bible Study
- A Weekly Meeting
- A Social Activist Group
- A Support Group

The goal of REALife Groups is to show that the Kingdom becomes real in people's lives when they have the right elements interacting. These elements are gospel, mission, and community.

Gospel (Drawing to Christ)

Missional-Incarnational communities must have a deep sense of communion with God. Both on an individual and a communal level, there must be disciplines that are aimed at spiritual formation and “being” in God’s presence. The gospel is the only means in which to connect with God. Jesus was both sent on a mission, developed a community and lived as the Incarnational God.

Become Learners

- Gospel Power - saved from the penalty of sin; being saved from the power of sin; and will be saved from the presence of sin
- Gospel People - new identity in Christ
- Gospel Purpose - making disciples who make disciples
- Gospel Practices - live out the gospel in everyday life

Community (Developing in Community)

Missional-Incarnational communities must have a deep sense of life together—that is, community. These communities practice disciplines of togetherness as they live out a shared story in God’s life. God’s calling and sending draws them together and forms deep bonds.

Become a Family

- Become familiar with each other
- Grow in speaking truth in love to each other
- Develop pastoral care skills within the group
- Direct members toward next steps for spiritual growth & development

Mission (Deploying in Culture)

Missional-Incarnational communities must have a deep sense of participation within God’s mission. The term “missional” indicates being sent; the term “incarnational” indicates how we are sent out into the world to live among people for the purpose of engagement. Therefore, there must be disciplines of engagement with the world.

Become Servants & Missionaries

- Discover the needs of your neighborhoods and community
- Identify at least one way/area to tangibly express the gospel on a regular basis through serving
- Move beyond tasks to developing relationships in serving
- Regularly provide events that coincide with community needs

What is the gospel?

The gospel is called the “good news” and it is particularly good news about our sin problem. In a nutshell, we can sum it up this way:

The gospel is that God himself has come to rescue and renew creation in and through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Why does creation (which includes me) need rescuing? Because of sin.

Sin is living for my fame and glory instead of God’s. Sin is living life my way, for me, instead of living life, God’s way, for God.² We have all sinned and really need the gospel—we desperately need Jesus to rescue us from the penalty and effects of sin, which the Bible teaches is ultimate and eternal separation from God. When we repent (change our mind about who is really God in our lives) and by faith we believe that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection has secured our rescue and restored us to a right relationship with God the Father, then this good news is true for us! And we have been sent out to proclaim this same gospel of restoration to the entire world.

UNDERSTANDING TWO GOSPEL PERSPECTIVES

We can read the Bible across the grain (thematically) and we can read it with the grain (as a story). Both are necessary and each one leads to a different way of seeing the gospel. It takes both perspectives to fully understand and engage the gospel.

1. Thematically

The Gospel Power. We understand the *means* of salvation.

God—eternal, all powerful, creator of everything

Sin—humanity has all chosen self-rule over submission, in relationship, to God; the penalty for sin is death

Jesus—God incarnate came to die as a substitute for the penalty of humanity’s sins

Faith—by faith in what Jesus did, not by any effort of our own, we are saved from our sins

In this case, the good news is that God is completely aware of our sin problem, and in and through the work of Jesus Christ, accepts us AND changes us by the power of his Spirit. We have been saved from the penalty of sin (justification), we are being saved from the power of sin (sanctification) and we will be saved from the presence of sin. This means the same power that saved us from the penalty for sin also helps us obey God now. (Ephesians 2:8-9; Colossians 1:27-29; 2:6-7)

This results in my understanding that...

I am more broken and sinful than I ever dared believe, and at the same time I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope, because of Jesus.

2. As a Story

The Gospel Purpose. Here we come to know the *reason* for salvation.

We can look at the gospel through the lens of a story...

Creation ► Fall ► Redemption ► Restoration

In this case, the good news is that God sent his Son to redeem the world from the effects of sin and create a new humanity. Eventually the whole world will be renewed to the way God originally created it. Rebellion, death, decay, injustice, and suffering will all be removed. When everything is restored, God will be seen by all for who he truly is—he will be glorified. (Ephesians 2:10,14-22; 2 Corinthians 5:15-21; Revelation 21)

How does this happen? Jesus helped clarify how we accomplish the purpose of the gospel by giving us his mission: “Go and make disciples”. (Matthew 28:19). As the arts, industry, politics, families—all areas of culture—are being filled with Jesus’ disciples bringing about his gospel restoration, the earth is being filled with his glory! That is the point of the restoration of all things—that God would be glorified!

The gospel is not just about my individual happiness or God's plan for my life. It is about God's plan for the world.

"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..."

The people of God (the Church) then become an alternative city within a city to display, as a foretaste, what the eternal city will be like. (Jeremiah 29; Matthew 5:3-16; Luke 6:20-36; 1 Peter 2:9-12)

God, in Jesus Christ, has given us both the MESSAGE of reconciliation (***gospel power***) and the MINISTRY of reconciliation (***gospel purpose***).

Ephesians 2:8-10 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. *And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

Good News!

When we repent of our sin and receive the new life that Jesus has offered us, we begin a journey of restoration inside and out. And not just for us—but for the entire world!

Fight the Good Fight

We fight to believe that Jesus is more precious, satisfying, and thrilling than anything else his world has to offer. In this fight however, we can sometimes become spiritual bullies and call it accountability partners. We hold one another to a checklist of virtues and we fight sin out of pride or guilt. We need to remove accountability from the center and replace it with the gospel.

The apostle Paul says: "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12). We fight in the power of the Spirit: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom 8:13, Col 3:5). These texts call us to "fight" and "put to death" the deeds of the body, our sinful patterns of anxiety, self-pity, anger, fear of man, vanity, pride, lust, greed and so on.

How do we fight sin without becoming legalistic or simply moralized? We must understand the gospel and continually grow in the gospel.

Repentance and Faith

In order to receive the redemptive benefits of the gospel, we must repent from trusting in false gods and exercise faith in the one true God. We must fight. Repentance and faith are the two sides to the coin of the gospel. They are not a one-time act to get us into heaven, but an entire way of life to maintain Christian joy. Repentance is not a work we tack onto our faith; it is an expression of faith.

Fighting with God's Promises

Repentance can be described as giving up our sinful behaviors and turning our affections away from false gods. God wants our hearts, not just our morality. Repentance is a stepping-stone to true joy. Faith, then, is trust in the one, good, true, dying, and rising-from-the-dead God. It is relying on the person of Jesus through the power of the Spirit by the promises of God. It is not blind faith but perceptive faith. Biblical faith sees the truth, goodness, and reliability of God's promises and chooses to trust them over the fleeting, false, and bad promises of the world.

The Christian life is a constant repenting from belief in false promises and an increasing belief in the true, good promises of God.

Repentance, then, is letting go of false gods and promises, both with our affections and actions. Faith is grabbing onto the one true God and his promises with our affections and actions. Faith is not merely belief in the facts of the gospel message; it is trusting and treasuring the gospel medium—Jesus Christ our Lord.

Repentance and faith form the bridge that leads us away from union with false gods and promises and into the promise of joyful union with the one true God. This is a gospel that motivates, that animates the life of a disciple of Jesus!

1. Know Your Sin

If you don't know your opponent, how will you beat him? We must become well-acquainted with the areas in our lives where the flesh gets the best of us, where we are prone to sin. Consider the circumstances that surround your repetitive sin. For example:

Do you find yourself tempted to vanity or self-pity when lingering in front of the mirror?

Does sexual lust or despair creep in on late, lonely nights watching TV?

Are you prone to pride when you succeed or when you receive a compliment?

Are you easily angered in traffic?

In order to beat the flesh, we have to know the flesh. We have to know how, when and where it hits. This means we need to think about the circumstances in which we are tempted to sin — rejection, compliment, late nights, the mirror. Consider the circumstances of your sin and know the flesh. Ask the Spirit to

convict you of those sins that need to be fought, to help you know your sin.

A second, equally important way for us to know our sin is to know why we gravitate to certain sins. Ask yourself why you are inclined to these sins. What do you believe they'll do for you? Provide acceptance, satisfaction, self-worth, significance?

As Tim Keller says, "Get to the sin beneath the sin." Know the lie you believe when you give into the flesh.

2. Fight Your Sin

Once we know our sin, we know where to strike. The challenge then is to actually strike, to beat up our flesh.

Many of us have been lulled into thinking that sin is really no big deal, that Jesus paid for it at the cross and therefore we are home free. But this is not the message of the Bible. The proof of your faith is that it fights. And the flesh doesn't give up easily.

Here's what it means to fight your sin: It is a habitual weakening of the flesh through constant fighting and contending in the Spirit for sweet victory over sin. It's not a religious, legalistic way to impress God or get on His good side. It's a fight for true joy, lasting happiness, for life.

Consider Romans 8:13: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Though fleshly living leads to spiritual death, Fight Club is ultimately about life, not death; about joy, not sorrow; about the gospel, not good works.

3. Trust Your Savior

So how do we fight? We fight, not in our own strength but with the muscle of the Spirit.

Consider Romans 8:13 again: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." We are to fight in a particular way — by

the Spirit. What does it mean to fight by the Spirit? The context of Romans 8 makes clear that the Spirit is the opposite of the flesh. The Spirit inclines your heart to believe — not the promises of the flesh, but the promises of God. Not the promise of vanity to feel important, self-pity to rectify poor self-image, sexual lust for satisfaction, or anger to get justice. The Spirit wants to empower us to believe better promises, promises that are true and lasting.

So instead of trusting fleeting, fleshly promises put your faith in the promises of God. Ask the Spirit to strengthen your faith to believe God over the flesh. Look for counter promises in God's Word. For example:

Instead of sexual lust, choose purity of heart: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God!" God is eternally satisfying; lust is fleeting.

Instead of vanity, consider the beauty of God: "What we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." We will see, reflect and rejoice in the beauty of God in Christ unveiled!

Romans 8:13 is also a promise: If we "put to death the deeds of the body," we are promised life. This is eternal life, life that is vibrant and soul-satisfying, both now and forever (Rom 8:10-11). Those who trust in the resurrected Christ for spiritual and eternal life will receive immortal bodies in which they may enjoy God and his renewed creation forever. No more flesh, sin, suffering.

The greatest weapon against our opponents is Spirit-empowered faith in the promises of God, promises that have been guaranteed by the death of Christ. Don't trust the promises of the flesh; trust in the promises of your Savior.

Never alone

We are not suppose to fight alone. REALife groups are the place to find partners in the fight. It is the place to speak truth to one another and share our struggles and failures in a safe

environment. Every situation can be handled with the gospel in REALife group settings.

Hebrews tells us that this is a community affair: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (3:12-14).

Gospel-center questions for REALife groups

These questions are meant to get to the heart of the issues you may be facing and allow the conversation to develop in the group so others can help you fight.

1. What are you desiring more than anything else?
2. What do you find yourself day dreaming or fantasizing about?
3. What lies are you subtly believing that undermine the truth of the gospel?
4. Are you astonished with the gospel?
5. Where have you made much of yourself and little of God?
6. Is technology stealing attention from your family?
7. Is work replacing your spouse's place in your heart?
8. What fears are paralyzing your heart from enjoying God?
9. What consumes your thoughts when you have alone time?
10. How did you hear from the Lord in Scripture this week? What are you going to do about it?

Our Identity

In the world, my identity and self-worth are based on what I can accomplish, on how hard I work, or on how moral I am.

Therefore, I look down on others who aren't as moral or obedient as me. But in the gospel, my identity and self-worth are based on God's love for me in Jesus, unable to accomplish or earn his love by my actions. Therefore, I can't look down on someone different than me because I am no better than they are.

As disciples, we are new creations in Jesus and are adopted as His sons and daughters. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to find our identity in everything but the new identity we have been given in Christ. REALife Groups are designed to allow us to focus on what it means to live out our true identity and image God in our lives.

FAMILY

We are children of God who live and care for each other as a family. God has always desired a people—an earthly family—who would live in such a way that the world would know what he is like. Jesus said that those who live in his ways and obey his Father are truly his family. Through Jesus we believe we are children of God and brothers and sisters with each other. As family we get to personally care for the needs of one another—both physically and spiritually. We disciple, nurture and hold each other accountable to this Covenant life together. We do this through regular gatherings and consistent involvement in a REALife group. (Genesis 12:1-3; John 1:12-13; Romans 12:10-16)

MISSIONARIES

We are sent by God to restore all things to himself. God sent his son, Jesus, to Earth to take on human form and live within the culture. He worked, ate and interacted among the people; living in such a way that those around him could see and experience what God was truly like. Jesus came so that all people, places and things could be restored to a right relationship with God. In the same way, we believe we are missionaries sent into our culture to

restore all things to God through Jesus. We live this out as part of a missional community. (John 1:14, 20:21; Colossians 1:19; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

SERVANTS

We are servants of God who serve others as a way of life. Fully God—fully human, Jesus took on the posture of a servant. He gave his life, even unto death, so that others could experience salvation, peace and restoration. Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves..." All those who follow Jesus are called to serve in the same humility. For us this means joyful submission to God, leadership and to each other, as we serve whomever God brings into our lives. We do whatever needs doing, whenever it's needed and wherever it leads us. (Matthew 20:25-28, 25:31-46; John 13:1-17; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Peter 2:16)

LEARNERS

We are disciples of Jesus who take responsibility for our own development and that of others. As a young man Jesus grew in both height and wisdom. He learned from local religious teachers, by living in community, and through regular times of listening to God. Jesus called others to follow his ways, to be his disciples and live in obedience to all that God commands. He then sent these followers out to make new disciples. We believe we are also called to be followers of Jesus who take responsibility for our own development and the development of others. This includes both our personal time with God as well as involvement together in training provided by spiritual leadership. (Luke 2:52; Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 2:2)

10 Tips for REALife Groups

1. KNOW GOD

- cultivate a steady devotional/prayer life
- serve with the strength God supplies

2. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

- pastor your group
- notice when somebody disappears

3. KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

- know the culture
- know your neighbors

4. DON'T GO ALONE

- share leadership, i.e. host, meals, prayer, mission

5. SAY WHO YOU ARE (AND WHO YOU AREN'T) EVERY WEEK

- Deconstruct small group/bible study/social group
- Reaffirm our vision & mission

6. GET OUT OF THE LIVING ROOM

- on mission
- in celebration

7. LIVE THE 8 WAYS TO EASILY BE MISSIONAL

- Out loud, let gospel talk be ordinary talk. Don't hide your faith.

8. EAT ,LAUGH, PRAY, and SERVE TOGETHER

- a healthy group will do all 4

9. TELL YOUR STORIES

10. COME TO SERVE (NOT JUST GET) ON SUNDAYS

Four practices for REALife Groups

SHARE *life and truth through stories and Scripture*

PRAY *for one another and the community*

ENGAGE *people and culture of your community with the gospel*

LOVE *one another by eating and exercising hospitality*

Four principles for REALife Groups

We all are broken: We are all more broken than we want to admit, and God is more holy than we comprehend.

We all need Jesus: In Jesus we are more forgiven and accepted than we can imagine, and God is more delighted in us that we understand.

We all need one another: We need each other to share our struggles and joys in following Jesus.

The world needs the gospel: The gospel of Christ changes and renews the peoples and cultures of the world.

8 Ways to Easily be Missional

Missional is not an event we tack onto our already busy lives. It is our life. Mission should be the way we live, not something we add onto life. We can be missional in everyday ways without even overloading our schedules. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1. Eat with Non-Christians.** We all eat three meals a day. Why not make a habit of sharing one of those meals with a non-Christian or with a family of non-Christians? Go to lunch with a co-worker, not by yourself. Invite the neighbors over for family dinner. If it's too much work to cook a big dinner, just order pizza and put the focus on conversation. When you go out for a meal, invite a non-Christian friend. Have cookouts and invite Christians and non-Christians. Flee the Christian subculture.
- 2. Walk.** If you live in a walkable area, make a practice of getting out and walking around your neighborhood. Be deliberate in your walk. Say hello to people you don't know. Strike up conversations. Attract attention by walking the dog, taking a 6-pack (and share), bringing the kids. Make friends. Get out of your house! Take interest in your neighbors. Ask questions. Engage. Pray as you go.
- 3. Be a Regular.** Instead of hopping all over the city for gas, groceries, haircuts, eating out, and coffee, go to the same places. Get to know the staff. Go to the same places at the same times. Smile. Ask questions. Be a regular. Build relationships. Be a Regular.
- 4. Hobby with Non-Christians.** Pick a hobby that you can share. Get out and do something you enjoy with others. Try City League sports. Local rowing and cycling teams. Share your hobby by teaching lessons. Teach sewing lessons, piano lessons, violin, guitar, knitting, tennis lessons. Be prayerful. Be intentional. Be winsome. Have fun. Be yourself.

5. Talk to Your Co-workers. How hard is that? Take your breaks with intentionality. Go out with your team or task force after work. Show interest in your co-workers. Pick four and pray for them. Form mom's groups in your neighborhood and don't make them exclusively Christian. Schedule play dates with the neighbors' kids. Work on mission.

6. Volunteer with Non-Profits. Find a non-profit in your part of the city and take Saturday a month to serve your city. Bring your neighbors, your friends, or your small group. Spend time with your church serving your city. Once a month. You can do it!

7. Participate in City Events. Instead of playing X-Box, watching TV, or surfing the net, participate in city events. Go to fundraisers, festivals, clean-ups, summer shows, and concerts. Participate missionally. Strike up conversation. Study the culture. Reflect on what you see and hear. Pray for the city. Love the city. Participate with the city.

8. Serve your Neighbors. Help a neighbor by weeding, mowing, building a cabinet, fixing a car. Stop by the neighborhood association or apartment office and ask if there is anything you can do to help improve things. Ask your local Police and Fire Stations if there is anything you can do to help them. Get creative. Just serve!

Don't make the mistake of making "missional" another thing to add to your schedule. Instead, make your existing schedule missional.

Integrating the life-transforming power of Jesus in to everyday life

The gospel must be lived out in everyday life. Community building can't be merely regulated to a mid-week small group meeting and a Sunday morning service. It must extend far beyond these events to fulfill all the great "one another passages" of the New Testament. Moreover, the work of evangelism (mission) can't be accomplished through mere door knocking, tract passing, or making sermons more "relevant to the unchurched." Our missionary methods must extend into the ordinary activities of our routines if we are to follow the New Testament model. We must intentionally evaluate and reform our everyday lives around the the gospel. Here is a quick exercise to help develop this missional mindset.

First, simply list out all the activities that make up your daily, weekly, and monthly routines. You should write down everything in these routines even if they seem mundane. Your daily list might include things like eating meals, go to the gym, driving to work, walk the dog, and play time with the kids. Your weekly list might include things like watch football, go to the park, grocery shopping, trip to the library, and play basketball. Your monthly list might include things like see a movie, take trash to the dump, get a haircut, camping, and budgeting. I would recommend opening up a Word doc and revising it as your routines shift over time.

Second, begin to assess all these ordinary activities through a trifold lens of community, mission, and gospel. You want to consider whether or not you can take these activities and add each of these three components. For example, let us consider the universal routine of grocery shopping. It is quite easy to add a communal and missional component to your weekly trip to the grocery. The first step would be to invite a Christian from your local church and a non-Christian friend to join you in this common routine. The second step is to bring the gospel into the activity. The gospel component can be added in a natural but intentional way as you converse throughout the activity.

Shopping will bring up very important topics such as stewardship, family, and health. These topics can easily be used as a path to explicitly talking about the gospel. The third step and perhaps the hardest is to try your best to make this more than an one time event. You want this to become part of your weekly shopping routine. Just think how the kingdom would expand if you took as many of your routine activities as possible and disciplined yourself to include these three components! Moreover, you aren't adding yet another event to you already crowded routine but rather sanctifying your everyday life!

In conclusion, I understand that this is exercise doesn't answer everything. Some of your activities are meant to be solitary. This certainly is acceptable. However, it is probably a different issue altogether if the lists you have constructed don't include about dozen activities that can be reformed to include all three components. I find people prefer programatic evangelism and community life (if you can even call it that) because it doesn't invade their personal space. That is irreconcilable with the life of Jesus and implications of the gospel. You must change.