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SMALL GROUPS

What appears to be a fad and is challenged by some soon becomes acceptable to almost all. There was a time when it was expected that Christian women would wear their hair long. When some women started wearing short styles, some preachers condemned the practice. It has been said that short hair on women only became acceptable when elders wives started wearing their hair that way. There is another practice that seems to be a fad, even though many will say it was practiced in the first century, which is gaining acceptance in the Churches of Christ even though the practice is inconsistent with what has long been one of the basic tenets of our faith. That is the practice of “small group” gatherings in place of some of the assemblies of a larger congregation.

The doctrine of congregational autonomy has been foundational in this fellowship. Some of the more conservative of the fellowship argue that individual congregations should not support various organizations out of their treasury because that would be cooperation with other congregations. This was one of the issues that split the Disciples of Christ into three distinct branches: Christian Churches, Disciples of Christ, and Churches of Christ. Some accepted Missionary Societies, and others argued they were a violation of congregational autonomy. Even though the Baptists generally claim that each congregation is independently governed, some say that their “Conventions” are a form of hierarchical government. These see little difference between decisions being made by a Convention and decisions made by Bishops, Cardinals, and a Pope.

Some people argue that the Bible seems to indicate that in the first century each town or city had only one congregation. Others say that the books to the Corinthians make it clear that the Christians in that city constituted several small “home churches.” Whichever is true, it doesn’t really seem to matter. If there were many congregations in Corinth, there is no indication that they were one congregation that occasionally split into smaller groups, but rather that each group met consistently and independently. In contrast, the modern small group model generally consists of a large congregation meeting once a week (Sunday morning, perhaps) and the members of that congregation meeting separately at other times during the week.

In a congregation without elders, it would be easy to argue that such a model might be acceptable. If the larger congregation has elders, and those elders also have authority over the small groups, this becomes an inconsistency of doctrine. When each small group meets independently, it makes up a new and separate congregation, at least for the time that they meet. If one body of elders claims authority over all the small groups that meet out of the larger congregation, then in practice they are saying that elders may have authority over more than one congregation.

One of the bedrock passages for congregational autonomy is Titus 1:5. “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” Laying aside the argument that these elders were to be appointed by someone who didn’t even belong to their city, there are still two ways to go. If each city had only one congregation, then this does indeed argue for congregational autonomy. If, on the other hand, there were several small congregations in larger cities, then this passage allows one elder or set of elders over several congregations, as long as all those congregations are in the same city. This would then allow one group of elders to oversee several small group congregations, but would mean the same elders would be over all congregations, large or small, in their city. Either way, the modern practice becomes inconsistent with the Titus passage.

This is not to say that small congregations under the umbrella of a larger congregation are wrong. It is to say, however, that before we jump on that bandwagon we should do a little more studying to see if it, or any other doctrine, is right or wrong.

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HOW MUCH MORE

People who study rhetoric, or even English grammar, are familiar with all sorts of literary devices. One could mention irony, hyperbole, allegory, simile, and metaphor. In philosophy there are arguments *ad absurdum*, *a pirori*, *a posteriori*, and even *ad nauseum*. But there is another device, known in Hebrew as *kal v'chomer* (light and heavy), which in rhetoric is called an *a fortiori* argument. It means arguing from a strong proposition to establish a (perhaps) weaker position. "He is dead; it stands to reason, then, that he is not breathing." This form of reasoning was used at least 21 times in scripture, including several times by Jesus and Paul. It is most often stated using the phrase, "how much more."

Miscellaneous

There are some examples that make very good points, which might also serve as examples of this device. They come from various sources.

"While I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the LORD; and how much more after my death?" (Deut 31:27) Moses gives a classic example. For about forty years he has been putting up with the Israelite nation; in fact it was their rebellion that resulted in forty years' wandering. He knows these people. And so he tells them what is likely to come. If they have

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been rebellious under his leadership, they are even more likely to rebel when he is no longer around.

There is an incident in 1 Samuel 14 in which Saul has commanded his army not to eat anything until they had won the battle. His son, Jonathan, did not hear the command, and ate some honey he came upon in the woods. His flagging strength was renewed. When someone told him of his father's command, he questioned his father's intelligence, saying:

See, I pray you, how mine eyes have been enlightened, because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more, if haply the people had eaten freely to day of the spoil of their enemies which they found? for had there not been now a much greater slaughter among the Philistines? (1 Sam 14:29-30)

Jonathan's friend, David, was not immune to the *kal v'chomer* argument. After the battle of Gibeah, an Amalekite came to tell David that Saul was dead. To prove his point, he admitted that he had come upon Saul while he was still alive, but had killed him to make sure the Philistines would not take him alive. David had the young man executed for killing the king. A few chapters of 2 Samuel later, two of the commanders of the army of Saul's son, Ishbosheth, kill their lord as he rested. Actually, they smote him, slew him, and beheaded him—no simple knife to the heart. They brought Ishbosheth's head to David, thinking to be rewarded for killing his enemy. David asked them why they figured he would reward them, after what he had done to the Amalekite. He ordered them executed, saying:

When one told me, saying, Behold, Saul is dead, thinking to have brought good tidings, I took hold of him, and slew him in Ziklag, who thought that I would have given him a reward for his tidings: How much more, when wicked men have slain a righteous person in his own house upon his bed? shall I not therefore now require his blood of your hand, and take you away from the earth? (2 Sam 4:10-11)

Much later in his life, near the end of his reign, David was fleeing Jerusalem in the face of rebellion by his own sons. As he did so, a man of Benjamin named Shimei cursed him. David's commanders wanted to take Shimei's head for this, but David replied that if his own son could seek his life, "how much more now may this Benjamite do it?" (2 Sam 16:11)

Solomon puts this device to good use in the proverbs. Consider these three examples.

Hell and destruction are before the LORD: how much more then the hearts of the children of men? (Prov 15:11; If God sees hell and destruction, surely he knows man's heart.)

All the brethren of the poor do hate him: how much more do his friends go far from him? he pursueth them with words, yet they are wanting to him. (Prov 19:7; If a poor man's own family disowns him, what will his fair-weather friends do?)

The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind? (Prov 21:27; If God rejects a sacrifice just because the man who brings it is wicked, how much worse is it when the attitude matches the deeds?)

"Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?" (1 Cor 6:3) Paul is chiding the Corinthians for taking each other to court before the civil authorities. In stating that they

should rather resolve their issues themselves, he compares judging temporal matters in the church to the weightier matter of judging angels. What he means by saying we shall judge angels has been open to interpretation. Be that as it may, if God gives us that responsibility, why can't we judge simple matters between church members?

Most of these examples are from the Old Testament. In the New Testament, however, we have a couple of examples on matters of great import. That is not to say that the soldiers of Ishbosheth did not face grave danger when David used this argument. Rather, there are some matters of universal import that can be proven by a *kal v'chomer* argument.

God's Care

God cares for people; not just "His" people, but people in general. Jesus makes this abundantly clear by two uses of this type of argument.

He first cites the goodness of parents. A parent would not substitute a similar-looking rock for a loaf of bread. If asked for a harmless fish he would not substitute a venomous snake. "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Lk 11:13) Even those among the worst of human parents care for their children. They give them what they can. Even some notorious serial killers raised their own children as best they could. God, who is the ultimately good parent, gives one of the best gifts, his Holy Spirit, to those who ask. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you all shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Jesus also points to the care God shows for the rest of creation. If man is greater than the rest of creation, as indicated in Genesis 1, and if God cares for all creation, therefore God must care greatly for man.

Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls? ... Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Lk 12:24, 27-28)

Blood Sacrifice

God, in fact, cares so much for man that he provided the best possible sacrifice for sin. People sin. That is a fact of life. And if people sin, they require forgiveness in order to get back into a right relationship with God. The writer of the letter to the Messianic Jews (Hebrews) argues that "without shedding of blood is no

remission." (Heb 9:22) This statement comes after (s)he makes a *kal v'chomer* argument that the intended audience of the letter, being familiar with Jewish logic, would be sure to understand.

Some people argue that the blood sacrifices of the Law of Moses were insufficient to forgive sin, and that is why Jesus had to die. This writer says that is not true. Under the Law there were certain sacrifices that were effective for cleansing certain sins. The sacrifices for sin delineated in the early chapters of Leviticus brought forgiveness for sins committed without malice, for violations of pledges, and for certain sins committed by the leaders or the people. For those who touched a dead body (thus making them unclean), being sprinkled with water in which was mixed the ashes of an unblemished heifer, killed in a ceremonial way and in a ceremonial place, was sufficient to cleanse them. These blood sacrifices were quite effective, according to the author of this letter.

Then why did Jesus have to die on the stake? If these sacrifices were effective, how would his death be

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any more effective? The author argues that it is not so much a matter of effectiveness as efficiency.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:13-14)

The other sacrifices were effective to cleanse the flesh, but the blood of Jesus was even more efficient, cleansing also the conscience. Moreover, it was efficient in that, unlike the older sacrifices which had to be repeated with each sin, the sacrifice of Jesus could be offered once and be effective for all sins. "Now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Heb 9:26)

The American and British legal systems love a *a fortiori* arguments. The Jews also loved such arguments, calling them by a different name. If God shows himself in all of creation, how much more does he show himself in his word. And that's a *kal v'chomer* for all of us.

THE CHORD

In a recent interview, jazz pianist Herbie Hancock told of a time when he was playing with the Miles Davis quintet. The trumpeter was approaching the climax of a solo when Mr. Hancock says he hit a “really wrong” chord. He said Mr. Davis just stopped, then went on to play a few notes that made the chord right. “Years later,” Mr. Hancock said, “I realized that Miles didn’t judge my chord; only I judged it.”

Those in the arts tend to be extremely critical of themselves. Driven to give the audience their best, they find fault in everything they do. Not every performance, painting, or composition can be perfect. Very rarely is anything perfect. But artists, perhaps more than anyone else, expect near perfection. That, after all, is the reason for rehearsals. The problem is, “practice does not make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect.” There is always something we can do better: some choice of word, a brush stroke, a vocal tone, or hand position. We don’t like to hear, “nobody’s perfect,” because we think we ought to be. Many of us are like Mr. Hancock; we judge ourselves more harshly than others do. We judge ourselves more harshly than God does.

Perhaps one of the biggest excuses for not obeying the gospel is the idea that “God could never forgive me of my sin.” No matter what the sin, people fear that it is beyond the bounds of God’s forgiveness, even though there are no bounds to God’s forgiveness. Imagine a man who, in one night, committed assault and battery, lied on oath, and betrayed his best friend after telling him, “I’ve got your back.” This sounds like a habitual liar and a criminal, yet the apostle Peter became one of the leading figures in teaching about God’s forgiveness. Another man was an accessory to murder and executed countless warrants on merely political prisoners. Still, Paul

(formerly known as Saul) could say, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” (1 Tim 1:15) One apostle, Simon, was probably an assassin; another, Levi/Matthew, possibly made his living through fraud. None of these were beyond forgiveness. Paul lists a few other sins that are all forgivable.

Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

God does not judge our chord harshly. Instead, he makes it right. The problem is that we sometimes judge our chord. It may indeed be what seems an improper chord. “In many things we offend altogether. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.” (Jas 3:2) It is very easy to say the wrong thing in a given situation. Who hasn’t heard or said the wrong thing at a funeral, a hospital bed, or even a less stressful situation. Once the words are out they cannot be recalled; they may strike a wrong chord. But the situation is not hopeless. It may be that the friendship would survive the words, but ends up not surviving the guilt. The person who misspoke avoids the friend because they judge their chord.

Sometimes we need to remember that God forgives, and continues to forgive. If God does not judge our chord, neither should we. Whether it be in word or deed, once we give it to God we should let go of it ourselves. After all, God makes better music than even Miles Davis.

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