

Why Sermon-Based Studies?

Generally, our small group ministry asks all of our small groups to spend part of each year doing Bible studies that correspond with Sunday morning messages. I understand that this may be a new idea to some at Princetown Church, but this is something I have done for over 13 years with dozens and dozens of groups and found it to be effective in the life of the church.

Often I am asked: *Why sermon-based studies? Wouldn't it be best to allow groups to choose their own studies to meet the particular needs of their groups?*

This is a great question! The answer is, we typically do allow groups to choose their own pre-approved studies for most of the year. However, we ordinarily require small groups to do a sermon-based study for a short period of time each year as well.

The idea for this type of study comes from a *proclamation* and *application* model. Proclamation occurs in the Sunday morning message. This is when church attendees gather and listen to the reading and teaching of Scripture as a church body. This weekly expositional teaching is designed to help the people of Princetown Church to better understand specific Scripture passages and the Bible as a whole.

The role of small groups is to be a key part of the *application* process. Although application begins as the Holy Spirit reveals truth to people at Sunday worship services, in order for applications to actually lead to transformation, they must be further developed. This can be done through personal study, but Princetown Church also encourages this to happen through the spiritual habit of meeting together in a small group. Small groups allow for accountability and the sharing of varying perspectives with one another.

Princetown Church small groups are micro-communities in which those connected to the church can discuss the Sunday messages, study Scripture, and develop practical (individual and group) action plans for spiritual growth, which will prayerfully lead to transformed lives.

Below are several reasons why Princetown Church desires small groups to do sermon-based studies:

1. Unity Makes Us a Better Church.

When all our small groups do the same study, there is a great sense of our being one church. We are called to pull together in our study, our involvement, our commitment, our growing together, and our shared experience of Sunday mornings.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

When small groups study the same Scripture, doctrines, and topics, we are pointed toward unity as a church.

2. Princetown Church’s pastors have been sovereignly called to teach and lead our church.

The pastors at Princetown Church have been called by God to teach the Word and lead our church in the context of Princetown, New York and for the particular people God has called to be the body of Christ, known as Princetown Church. These are the pastors God has given us, as members or regular attenders of Princetown Church, from whom we learn and follow as our spiritual leaders (Hebrews 13:17).

3. Sermon-based studies make the preaching better.

As Pastor Ian and I prepare our messages, we are listening for God’s Word for His people--timely and transformative. And we pray that our messages are impactful. An impactful message is one that is heard, remembered, reviewed, and ‘chewed on.’ That’s what happens with a sermon-based study in a small group.

Knowing that people are going to think about and talk about a message after Sunday morning makes me work on communicating for the small groups, teaching beyond the Sunday morning experience. It makes me (I think) a better preacher.

But, it’s not just that Ian & I are becoming better preachers. Encouraging people to focus on the Sunday sermons helps them see God’s plan to make preaching central to the life of the church, which the Bible conveys as truth (Romans 10:14-15; 1 Timothy 6:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21). It’s all about growing better together, around His Word and to His glory.

4. A growth process rather than a curriculum.

Many times people try to learn by going through a curriculum of topics (a classroom structure). This can be beneficial when learning in certain situations, but sermon-based small groups learn by, what a pastor named Larry Osborne calls, a “velcro process.”

In this process of learning, no set information must be covered in a distinct order. Our small groups members may have specific questions about following Jesus and also be faced with particular circumstances. Doing a sermon-based study allows for people to ask specific questions regarding the Bible and their circumstance at the time of need. These times can be referred to as “need-to-know” or “need-to-grow” situations. In his book *Sticky Church*, Larry Osborne says, “The ultimate goal of a ‘sermon-based’ small group is simply to velcro people to the two things they will need most when faced with a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation: the Bible and other Christians.”¹ This contributes to the idea that a small group is an *environment for growth* more than a classroom for teaching.

5. The Bible is opened every time a group meets.

By doing a sermon-based study, groups need not depend on another book, video series, or teaching; the Bible is the textbook for study. The Bible is God’s Word to us, and it should be used as our primary source of understanding who God is and how we are to live (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

6. Study one thing well.

Sometimes we like to study a variety of topics to address different areas of our lives, which can be helpful at times; but, it is much more effective to retain knowledge and grow by studying one thing at a time in a deeper manner.

This is the idea with the sermon-based study. When we hear Scripture, its exposition, and some potential applications on a Sunday morning, we will retain the knowledge much more effectively if we go back and review it. We can review it personally, but we can also review it as small groups during our study times. Reviewing it through discussion with others transforms the knowledge we gain in action and life change. The more we reflect, pray, and discuss Scripture, the more we will grow and be transformed by Scripture.

¹ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 43. *Sticky Church* is a good resource about the value of sermon-based studies.

7. Learn new practical applications.

By discussing the previous Sunday's message, Scripture, and its applications we can discover further applications from one another. Not only do we learn new practical applications from others, but we have the opportunity to encourage others with our words and in prayer as they step out in faith to take steps to follow Jesus in new ways.

8. Choose a group based upon *who* is in it rather than what they study.

When all our small groups study the same thing, the focus can center on the relationships with the people in the groups rather than which group is doing which study. One of our small group values is *others-focused* (John 13:34). We want to see encouraging, loving, and lasting relationships in our small groups. This happens best when group members are more concerned about *who* we connect with than what is being studied.

9. No additional homework.

When small groups do sermon-based studies, less preparation time by leaders may be required, while group members also do not necessarily need to spend additional time reading and preparing for the upcoming meeting.

I know that sermon-based studies are not the only way to learn and grow in Christ. I believe there are various ways to do that. But, I have found sermon-based studies to be one effective way to help a church grow in Christ and glorify God by enjoying Him together. My hope is that you now have a better understanding as to why we do sermon-based studies at Princetown Church.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me.

Loving Jesus for His glory with you,

Pastor Mike