

The
Relational
Way

From small group structures
to holistic life connections

M. SCOTT BOREN

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Dedication

In the movie *As Good as It Gets*, Jack Nicholson plays a reclusive writer. As he gets to know the character portrayed by Helen Hunt, he says to her, “You make me want to be a better man.”

This book is dedicated to my wife, Shawna, who makes me want to come out of the writer’s cave and be the love that Jesus displayed. Your beauty both inside and out challenges me to become a better man. I thank God for you every day and the beauty you have brought into my life.

Table of Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction - Fast-food, Bones, and the Way of God	13
Chapter 1 - Prioritize the Way of Relationality	23
Chapter 2 - Gather Around the Presence	47
Chapter 3 - Seeking God's Relational Kingdom	69
Chapter 4 - Write a New Story of Mission	93
Chapter 5 - Create Contagious Relationships	117
Chapter 6 - Embrace the Relational Dance	147
Chapter 7 - Connect Relationships on Four Levels	175
Chapter 8 - Invest Relationally in Group Leaders	195
Chapter 9 - Equip the People for Kingdom Relationship	219
Chapter 10 - Mobilize for War	243
Notes	271

Foreword

by ALAN J. ROXBURGH

This is an important book. Read it slowly, prepared to have your view of small groups in the church reoriented. If you are a church leader wrestling with a desire to form God's people, then you're holding a book that can be incredibly important for your future.

I have known Scott for more than a dozen years. I have had the immense privilege of watching him wrestle with big questions about the church and small groups. What fascinates me about Scott is his constant desire to figure things out. He's a very practical individual, concerned about how to make ideas land in ways that people can understand and apply them to their context.

Small group ministry in the local church has been at the heart of Scott's wrestling. What Scott has written in this book is far more than theory or nice ideas garnered from books, conferences and programs. This book distills his practical wisdom in working with many kinds of churches over an extended period of time. However, the book is far more than an incredibly helpful guide into small group ministry. Let me explain.

I have worked with small group ministry for many years as a pastor in three local churches. The renewal movements of the 1960s placed the small group at the center of its strategies. But so often the shape of these groups was something like 'encounter groups lite' where suburban, expressive individualism could find a religious version of its search for identity and experience. When people like Ralph Neighbour tried to address these captivities, their voices were hardly heard. As a result, most small group ministry

remained simply a mechanism for integrating and supporting individuals within a church.

I have grown tired and suspicious of most small group processes I've seen over the years. In fact, there is this part of me that wants to run away from most of the small groups I see functioning in churches today. This is where Scott's book makes a difference. He understands that North American culture is in the midst of massive shifts, especially in relationship to structures, programs, and their use to get individuals to do things. Scott knows that one more program or another list of steps and 'how-to's' will not address the deep malaise of Christian life in our churches.

If you are looking for a theological framework linked to a practical way of cultivating a missionary people, this book will take you on that journey. I urge you to be clear about one thing before you read further. Scott is inviting you to consider changing some of your most basic frameworks and understanding of small group ministry in the church. He wants you to think theologically and biblically before all else. He wants you to change the culture of your local church with a set of convictions that go far beyond making small groups 'work.' This book is about the formation of local churches which are infecting their communities with Jesus' life and message. It's not just a new set of ideas but a radically re-oriented way of life.

Read on, read slowly, and hear an invitation to become a different kind of church.

Alan J. Roxburgh
Pastor, Author and Consultant

Foreword

by RANDY FRAZEE

The Christian conversation on community begins with the very nature of God. The one true God of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 is a relational God. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons but share an essence or oneness. We cannot fully understand one person of the Godhead without looking at them as a single community.

We were made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26 is not a statement directed at our individuality as much as it towards our nature as a community. It was not just Adam who was made in the image of God, but Adam and Eve. This is why God said it was not good for the Adam to be alone in the garden. The image of God is not completely manifested in us without community.

Of course, as a result of sin, community is greatly damaged if not destroyed in Genesis 3. This is the birth of death and of individualism. “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” James asks. He answers his own question straightforwardly, “You desire but you do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight” (James 4:2; cf. Genesis 4). This is the story of our life.

Christ came to change this condition. The gospel is not merely the redemption of the individual into an eternal relationship with God; it is the restoration of community or the image of God in us. This New Community is called “The Church.” Without the presence and practice of community in Christ there is no church. What you have instead is a collection of individuals who happen to gather in the same room. There is a fundamental difference.

Many of us who are church leaders are just now coming to terms with the negative impact of the last 50 years has had on the church, particularly in modern, high-tech societies. The United States has been dubbed by many sociologists as the most individualized society in human history. Our lives are severely fragmented by planes, trains and automobiles; by excessive activity and just enough discretionary money to pay for it. We are a society that only asks *can* we do something, not *should* we do something.

It is in this context that church leaders must form authentic, Christ-centered community. Most leaders were born into isolation and individualism and “do not know that they do not know” that there is a fundamental problem. Other leaders see the vision of Christ and try to do what they can, but at times it seems nearly impossible. It is easy to give up and many do.

This is where *The Relational Way* comes to our rescue. Scott has devoted his life to the cause of community. Here are a couple of things among many that I think you will like about this book. First, Scott gets it. He understands the ancient biblical mandate for the church to be a community of oneness laid out so clearly by Jesus in John 17 and Paul in the book of Ephesians. Second, he doesn't just pontificate on lofty theological ideals, but addresses our contemporary problem of fragmentation head on. It is imperative that every church leader and parishioner understand the “pickle” we've gotten ourselves into as a society and church. Scott does a fine job of helping us grasp this dilemma. Third, Scott is not going to give us a “one size fits all” proposal for a relational church, but peruses several worthy models and invites us to think for ourselves. All models must be contextualized and localized. Scott not only believes this but encourages it in his writing.

Most of all, a fellow practitioner, Scott is rooting for you to succeed all throughout the book. Success for Scott is your success in building a strong relational church that God the Father envisioned when he sent the Son and the Holy Spirit to us.

Randy Frazee

Teaching Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church

Fast-food, Bones and the Way of God

In the early 1950s, two brothers became frustrated with the costs involved with running their car-hop restaurant in San Bernardino, California. To save money, they experimented with a simplified menu, a streamlined food preparation process and inexpensive food, and they fired all of the servers on roller skates. Very quickly, the McDonald brothers became rich off of this experiment.

Ray Kroc sold milk-shake mixers, and he inquired as to why the McDonald's restaurant had purchased eight mixers as opposed to one or two like most of his other customers. Immediately, he saw the potential to take this method of serving food across the country. He bought the rights to franchise, and the rest is history.¹ From that model came many other fast-food providers, thus shaping an industry that feeds 25 percent of America every day.² With the promise of speed, service, and somewhat appealing taste, the world can eat three filling meals per day without focusing on the act of eating itself. In addition, the innovation of the drive-thru window created a scenario where eating can serve as a subsidiary function of the driving process.

The fast-food industry and the drive-thru experience serve as metaphors for how life works today. The pace of life, the demands on time and the expectations of efficiency and production rule our lives. The fast-food way of life also acts as a kind of parable for modern spirituality. It paints a picture for how many people approach God and the church. For instance, some people treat God as if he is the voice coming through the speaker at a

drive-thru sign. As a result, instead of sitting down with God and communing with him, they only set forth their requests of him. They drive thru whenever they need God to meet some pressing need, usually in the form of financial burdens, emotional problems, physical ailments, or the need to discover God's will. God has been reshaped into the image of a provider of spiritual goods and services to meet individual needs. As a result, the Bible serves as a book for quick answers to modern-day problems.

In the same vein, this way of doing life has infiltrated the church. Pastors and church leaders find themselves under intense pressure to meet the expectations of people who are looking for the drive-thru God experience. Spiritual shoppers are looking for the "God-made-easy" church, and if one church does not provide the right goods and services, then the spiritual shopper drives down the road to another church. The authors of the book *Stormfront* state, "What we, as discriminating shoppers of spiritual goods and services, finally want to know is, How will believing in this god improve my quality of life? Bottom line, what does this deity do for me?"³ Low-cost spirituality, prepackaged words from God, limited time commitment and non-invasive programming will always attract a crowd because the crowd has been shaped by the fast-food life.

The Marginalization of the Church

In addition to the pressure to meet the expectation of spiritual consumers, pastors and church leaders feel an overwhelming pressure from another source. This pressure is felt but often left unidentified. We don't know how to talk about it. It is a nagging pain with unknown origins. Alan Roxburgh helps us identify its source. He writes, "North American Christians are in an 'in-between' place. A certain world has come to an end but there is, as yet, no clarity on what is emerging."⁴ This in-between place sits after the period labeled as modernity, a time when the role of the church was clear. However, in this world of the "in-between," the role of the church is far from obvious. The church has become marginalized in what has been labeled a "post-Christian" society, and most church leaders—at least the honest ones—are looking for answers and direction with regard to the future of the church.

The church as we know it was built upon the idea of attracting people to attend spiritual events and services. In other words, people "go to church" and church leaders spend their efforts on developing ways to get people to

“come to church.” Church is a spiritual service that occurs at a specific spiritual time, at a specific spiritual place, led by spiritual people, for people with spiritual interests.

This model is founded upon the Constantinian assumptions about the role of spirituality in culture. When Constantine became the Roman Emperor, the church shifted from a gathering of radical subversives who chose to participate in a counter movement to a gathering of people who were being good Roman citizens by participating in the new religion of the Emperor. Roxburgh goes on to write that the church has developed since the fourth century at, or near, the center of culture, resulting in a level of congruence “between the overarching values and frameworks of the wider culture and the churches. Culture and church reflected congruence rather than contrast. The public square had room for both the church building and the town hall.”⁵

On this side of the world, the role of the church took on a slightly different form than the European version. While there was no official link between church and state in North America, the church remained at the center of our culture. As the western church has developed through its various manifestations and denominations, the purpose of the church has morphed into an organization that attracts people and meets their spiritual needs. The center of the church has become the Sunday morning event with the goal of making that event attractive enough to draw in observers from the culture.

While I am in no way castigating excellence in worship services or preaching, the goal of attracting people has a limited return on its investment. The church faces a crisis unique to our times. Church leaders are becoming aware of the massive transition within our culture. Accelerated change, uncertainty about the future, and instability dominate the social landscape. As such, this unprecedented cultural change is also changing the location of the church within the cultural mindset. The church finds itself in the midst of a culture that it is no longer equipped to understand or reach. It calls people to Jesus by trying to attract them to events and services, but those very people now view the church as increasingly marginalized, irrelevant, and even unattractive.

The Small Group Alternative

In the midst of these pressures, church leaders have discovered alternative ways of organizing and leading the people of God. Many have adopted small group strategies as a way to connect people and to counteract some of these pressures.

I found hope in small groups while reading David Yonggi Cho's book *Successful Home Cell Groups*. Through it, my imagination was captured by a radical way of being the church. This vision for the church disturbed me as much as it excited me. Because I was reading about a relational way of being the church, I could no longer settle for doing church the way I knew. Through his stories about small groups of people loving one another, along with the testimonies of idol worshippers who were led to Jesus through the love of these groups, God captured my imagination of what the church could be. I wanted to—no, I had to—live in this kind of church, even if the investment took the rest of my life.

As I dialog with pastors and church leaders across North America, I hear many stories that resemble that of my own. They read a book, attend a conference, or start a 40-day small-group campaign. The conclusion usually is, we need small groups to generate community. The leaders imagine that a small-group structure will address the challenges that churches face in the midst of the fast-food culture.

However, more often than not, the groups serve as another structure for attracting people to another spiritual meeting. This spiritual meeting is forced to compete with all the other spiritual offerings on the market. Fast-food spirituality doesn't die easily. Small-group structures can organize people into groups and even promote church growth, but they don't necessarily challenge the fast-food life that people bring to church. While looking upon the landscape of small-group experiments over the last few decades in North America, one pastor has observed, "Small groups simply became a part of an individual's personal 'do-it-yourself' religion that reinforced 'individualized faith.'"⁶

The Breath and the Bones

I have been helping churches develop small group systems since the early 1990s. Throughout these years, I have observed churches that have experimented with many different small-group models. Some have failed while

others have entered into the land of great success. Most have wandered in the land of mediocrity, searching for ways to develop their groups. The difference between success and failure doesn't correlate with a particular model or specific structure. In fact, one church could copy the exact structure and procedures that another church used successfully with drastically different results.

If the structure was not the key to success, what was? If small groups alone did not help a church enter into a radical lifestyle for God's kingdom, what did? As I asked these questions, I reflected on Ezekiel 37. In this chapter, God led the prophet into the valley where he saw piles of dry bones. Ezekiel wrote, "*He (the Spirit) led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.*" Today, many churches have a lot in common with these bones. People attend and some churches are even growing. But most only gather the people in one place without helping them connect with one another. The people sit together, but they are not connected in such a way as to form a connected body.

First, Ezekiel spoke to the bones, "*And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*" The church needs practical structures and methods for connecting individuals so as to form a body. We also need prophets today who will confront practices that promote the values of independence and individualism of the culture. It is time to re-think church so that it might become more than a gathering of like-minded individuals.

After the bones came together, Ezekiel observed, "*There is no breath in them.*" Many churches find themselves making the same observations about their church structures. They know how to do small groups. They know how to organize small group oversight (coaching). Some even know how to develop curriculum and grow their groups. But they don't see the life they desire within them. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Ezekiel reported, "*So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*"

Churches require structures. All breath and no structure results in church blobs, not church bodies. God's army requires efficient and flexible structures. Most churches stop at the search for church structure and settle

for connected bones, failing to discover what God wants to do within these structures. As a result, they miss out on the way of God.

Identifying the Breath

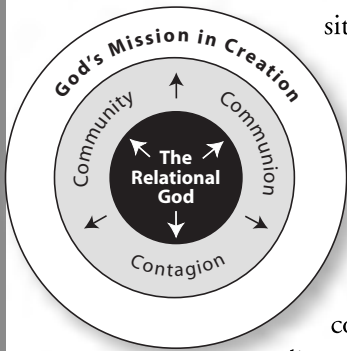
The breath could be called relational kingdom living. Such would be defined as a way of living with others that fits with the coming of the kingdom of God. It is a relational paradigm for life, a mode of living that defines the nature of the relational way.

The relational way is founded upon the God of relationality. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share life together perfectly, relating in such a way that each is fully available to the others. The mystery of God lies in how the three are one and the one are three. However, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not horde their relational sharing. The community shared by the godhead is missional in nature, self-giving in such a way that God invites people to participate in the God life, sharing in the community in which God exists. As

the church enters into this communion with God, sitting at his table with him, the people share community with one another. As the church practices life as community it becomes contagious, sharing life with those who have yet to participate in communion with God.

Communion with God, community with one another, and contagion of life overflowing from the nature of the relational God comprise the three aspects of what it means to live as a relational way of being the church.

Evidently, this is what was transpiring in the churches of the New Testament. In fact, the early church was often referred to as The Way. In one of the stories Luke records, he writes, *“Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way”* (Acts 19:8-9). Jesus referred to himself as The Way (John 14:6). The way of kingdom living in the early church was distinctive and missional. By referring to the church as The Way, it denotes that the people of God are called to action, a mode of interacting with the world that infects it with the life of God.



This model stands in stark contrast to the attractional approach to church. The attractional model assumes that people will come to God when they need him. It is true that he waits patiently for us, but God's sending nature is the model of God that we see in Jesus. God is a sending God. If the church today is to participate in the life of the Trinity, the people of God must learn to shift from a "come and observe" approach to a "go and demonstrate" approach. It must set aside the need to preserve the church as we know it—whether through small groups or through any number of other strategies—and give up our status to be on mission with God. In his excellent book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch states, "God is a missionary God. . . . Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is a church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love."⁷

The foundational question, then, is not "How do we create more small groups?" or "How do we grow the church through small groups?" or "What model of small groups works the best?" These are structural questions and you must learn to ask contrary questions about being a church on The Way: "How do we become a people that live in community that stands in contrast to the social structures of this world?" or "What are the practices of a people on the way with God?" or "What ways of living would manifest in being a church on mission with God?"

A Few Notes About This Book

To address this question, I have identified ten assumptions that church leaders often make when they embark on the small-group journey. They are structural myths that have quietly crept into small-group strategies, myths that logically coincide with the attractional church model. Because they cause church leaders to focus on the bones, there is some truth to them. This is what makes believing them so tempting. If they were obviously wrong, then this book would not be necessary. At some point on my small-group journey, I have believed each one of these to be true. As you read these myths, you may think that they are obviously errant. They are intentionally stated in black and white terms, but while working through the chapters you will discover the subtleties that make them so easy to believe.

To expose these myths, each chapter proposes a constructive alternative that I call a relational truth. These alternatives are presented through a unique approach. Rather than identifying specific churches or models for implementing specific practices, I have steered clear of pointing you to churches that are doing what I am talking about. There are enough books in print that do this. My goal is not to point you to easy answers or quick fixes that other churches have developed. When we depend upon models and methods developed elsewhere, we can easily miss out on God's activity in the midst of our own church. While emulating another church promises immediate results, I have discovered that I overlook how God is reshaping me and my church when I focus on following a model. Today is a day that God is reforming the church. He is calling the church from one place to another, much like he called the Israelite slaves out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The call is not to new programs or even to new ways of doing small groups. The call is to a new way of being the people of God. This requires transformative reshaping of both the corporate church and individual lives.

This book aims to stir your imagination rather than provide answers. To do this, I have woven theology together with practical application. Most books are written either theologically or practically. Few works merge these two worlds, which has always concerned me. Good theology is often left disconnected from church strategies. As well, applied or practical theology is often presented in isolation from good theology. The first half of each chapter offers a dialogue with the Word of God and theology that is meant to call church leaders out of the world of pragmatic answers to urgent problems. It is my attempt to move back into the rhythm of listening to the Spirit first. The second half offers guidelines that are connected to the theological dialogue, which follow the subtitle, "What does this mean ... practically?" These suggestions are meant to be read as conversation starters rather than definitive methods so that we can imagine how this might look. If you are practically-minded by nature, feel free to start with the practical half and then work back through the theological foundation. However, my hope is that you will work through each chapter from the beginning and allow the broad guidelines to stimulate your imagination.

I offer the theology and the practical parts as an invitation for further dialogue. Set aside your preconceived notions, assumptions, or rules about small groups and church and wrestle with the content. Argue with the points and

figure out what each means in your context. If you extend the limits to your imagination, you will be surprised at what the Spirit of God speaks to you.

A Prayer

I long for the day when God fulfills the vision of the valley of dry bones in North America. It is happening in pockets, but for the most part we have yet to see what God has for us. In this “in-between” time, the church has the opportunity to walk with God in new ways. Because we can no longer depend upon the methods and strategies of the past, we must depend upon God’s life in us. Today is a day of great opportunity for the church if we have the courage to enter honestly into this “in-between” time.

An experienced small-group pastor reviewed this book for me prior to publication. He commented, “I wonder if American church leadership can wait on God long enough to achieve the picture you are painting.” For sure, this book calls for imaginative thinking. As a result, some may conclude that it is impractical. I pray that you will find it compelling, a vision that will capture your heart and even mess with your expectations of God and the church. As I have written it, God has captured my imagination again, and he has messed with me to the point that I cannot be satisfied with a nice small group program in a growing church. He has implanted a call for a vision that will require a lifelong battle.

I will fight for a relational way of being the church even if it never comes to fruition in my lifetime. My imagination can now envision that which I have not completely seen. I am seeking God for a vision for the church that I can pass to my sons who are now toddlers. I want to start something that they will experience in a way than I may never know in my life and ministry. I hope and pray I get to experience it fully, but my guess is that we are embarking on a new way of being God’s people that will only be realized by future generations, which excites me.

I believe this is how the prophets of the Old Testament felt about God’s work in the world. At the end of Ezekiel’s vision, God said, *“O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”*

Lord, stir our imaginations that we might again see the relational kingdom that you have for us. Let this imagination renew hope. Let this hope stimulate faith. And let this faith produce endurance. May we realize the reality of the Spirit living through us that we might participate in mission with you to settle this land as a kingdom people. You have spoken, you are faithful, and we trust that you will fulfill. By your grace we will participate in this calling. Amen!