

The Gospel Versus Accountability Groups

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Let me begin by saying that your definition of “Accountability Groups” (from here on, AGs) may differ from what I’m talking about here, and that’s okay. I’m just going to examine a particular aspect of AGs, one which much personal experience has led me to believe is pervasive in Evangelicalism today. But it may not be a part of your experience of AGs. So bear with me.

I used to meet weekly with a small group of men from the church who struggled with issues common to men. When I was introducing a new quarter, which saw the addition of a few fellows to the group, these were some comments I made:

I am not interested in fighting one sin by using another sin. What good is it to strengthen our pride in order to overpower our lust? Why would we want to use guilt or the fear of man to make progress in freedom and holiness? Will feeding the flesh in one area to starve it in another really bring us closer to God and godliness? These methods are *not* The Gospel Method, and if we preached them to each other, we are not servants of Christ (Gal. 1:8-10).

What in the world am I talking about, you ask? I’m talking about the tendency of people in AGs to prod each other toward apparent holiness by unbiblical, non-Christian, *anti-Gospel* methods. These methods are not just unhelpful; they’re actually *harmful* to true holiness.

For a common example, take an AG that appeals to Pride in order to subdue Lust (Fear of Man being the negative flipside of the Pride Coin). Someone in such an AG would feel pressure not to slip into lustful behavior, so that he wouldn’t have to embarrass himself in front of the others in the group. If the group meets on a Wednesday night, the only thing keeping him from using the computer inappropriately on Tuesday night is the fear he has of telling his friends the next night. They’d obviously think less of him if he has something to say during confession time, and his Pride being stronger than his Lust, he controls his lustful behavior. (*Hasn’t this become the very definition of accountability??*)

Now, you run into a problem here. You haven’t applied the Gospel to the situation, so the Flesh is getting *stronger*, not weaker. It’s just one area of the Flesh that’s been losing out to another, for a time. But after a while, the Pride can’t control the Lust any more. The Lust leaps up, and overcomes the fellow, and he has to make a confession to his AG. The AG forgives him, and he goes home, and maybe his Lust overcomes him again in the next couple weeks. A few times he slips up, and a few times he confesses.

But then (and this is the worst part), since the Gospel has never really been injected into the problem, the fellow’s Pride overtakes him again. But this time it’s not strong enough to subdue the Lust. He still slips up, and acts out of Lust. But he’s too afraid of the shame it would bring to confess it to his AG, so he doesn’t tell them about it this time. Both Pride and Lust win out, and he withdraws into his shell of secrecy once again, into a massive downward spiral of hopelessness.

Trust me, this happens.

And it happens because we have a warped view of Christianity. We have a view that says, “Being a Christian is primarily about being a better person than most non-Christians. Anything that can help me be a better person must be good.” But Christianity is *not* primarily about being a better person, and *not* all things are helpful when it comes to growing in holiness. Some things that *seem* helpful are actually “of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23). Obviously, indulging the flesh in one area in order to stop it in another *isn’t really stopping it*.

When we participate in AGs driven by the Fear of Man or Pride, we testify that we believe that Christianity is simply about getting better. The most important thing becomes stopping sin and getting better. There's a feeling there, that someday I'll conquer this whole sin thing, and be *good enough*. If only I could get to a place where I could stand on my own two feet, not stumbling around all the time in sin! If only I could clean myself up just a little more, then I know I'd be all right with God and his people.

Devilry!

If you're part of an AG that employs pride, guilt, or fear tactics, you're confessing to the world that you want to be able to justify yourself before God and others. For you, it's about being "good enough." But the Gospel says that you'll never be "good enough." You're a sinner, and you'll always sin. Every day. More frequently than that, even.

We all need to know that, in and of ourselves, there is no hope. We'll never be perfect, not even "good enough." This is helpful because then we won't set our hope in the wrong thing. Our hope for acceptance from God and others doesn't come from our being or actions. It comes only from God, through Jesus Christ, by grace, through faith. Christianity isn't about becoming a sinless person; it's about a sinner finding forgiveness and freedom in the grace of God in Christ.

So what is the grace of God in Christ for us? It's the truth of the Gospel. It's the love of God. It's the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It's the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It's freedom from the penalty and power of sin—even though not fully realized in this life.

What does this freedom look like? It looks dangerously close to antinomianism (thinking that Christians don't "have to" obey the law of God). Historically speaking, those who "get" the Gospel have been accused by those who are more legalistic of being licentious. Martin Luther said, "Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but believe more boldly still. Sin shall not drag us away from Him...." He loved the law of God, but it was only the grace of God that let him love the law. Grace—the freedom to be a sinner found in Christ—is the foundation for keeping the law, which is what Christians want to do.

What's the best feeling in the world? For me, it's coming to communion after hearing the Gospel proclaimed—Christ's life, death, and resurrection for me, a sinner. When I hear the forgiveness and love and grace of God pronounced on me—a *sinner!*—a great and holy joy overwhelms me. This Gospel-driven sense of fellowship with God and his people is what conquers the desires to sin. At that moment, sin is the most repulsive thing in the world. We need to learn to cultivate that appreciation for the Gospel in our daily lives in order to cast off the shackles of evil desires from our hearts.

So if your AG is about this Gospel, God bless you. Such groups can make good use of honest confession, to proclaim and demonstrate mercy toward one another. But if your AG preaches another Gospel, if it uses the fear of man or pride as motivation to try to stop the indulgences of the flesh, watch out, because you've warped God's beautiful message of salvation and sanctification by the grace of Jesus Christ.