

Episode 29. "The Small Groups: The Lost Key."

Tuesday, February 1, 2022. 46 Minutes Long.

A ground-breaking episode on the small group structure that Early Christians used the first three centuries of history. John and Owen call it the "Lost Key," since Christians don't use it today. But the "Key" unlocks Spiritual growth for Christians – so it's vital for Christians to understand and use it.

John (00:00):

John Shields opens the episode by saying:

John (00:12):

Well, "Hello" friends in Podcast Land! This is Episode 29 in our bi-weekly series of "Saving Christianity," the podcast that wants us to return to peace, healing and hope in Christianity. We're coming to you every-other-Tuesday from Christian Family Online in America. I'm your host, John Shields. I'm here in the studio with my co-host, Owen Allen, and with our producer, Shannon Wolfe. This is our *second* episode of our Second Season, and we are very happy to be here talking to you in this – this Happy New Year. And this episode, Episode 29, is a foundational episode because it really gets to the nitty-gritty of how the Early Christians met, how they fellowshiped, how they worshiped, and *why* their Spiritual growth was so deep and so rapid.

And this episode is the first of *two* episodes on Christian small groups. The title of this episode is, "The Small Groups: The Lost Key." That's right. "The Small Groups: The Lost Key." And then in two weeks, we'll have a follow-up episode, and it's going to be called, "The Small Groups: Using the Key." And so, I can't tell you how excited I am to be talking about this. This material is rich. It's wonderful, and it's potentially life-changing. As we talk about small groups, let's bring in our co-host, Owen Allen. Owen, welcome to Episode 29.

Owen (01:52):

Well, thank you, John! And a great big "Welcome!" to all of our friends out in Podcast Land! You know, it's a blessing to be here in the studio with you and our intrepid producer, Shannon, in our *Second Season*, if you can imagine. You know, John and Shannon, as we mentioned in our last episode, we're especially blessed, we feel, to be in the Second Season because it turns out that 80 percent of all new podcasts *fail* their first year and shut down. But because of you, our loyal listeners out there in Podcast Land, we not only survived our first year, but we even earned the honor of a "Top 50 Award" from our podcast hosting service. But John, I'd love to talk about that. But let's jump right into the incredibly important subject, as you said, of *Christian small groups*. And the first thing we should know is that it's hard for Christians to grow Spiritually *all by themselves*.

Owen (02:57):

You know, we hear a lot about *hermits*. But Christians were never designed to be hermits. Now, to tell the truth, Christians *could* grow Spiritually all alone like "Robinson Crusoe" (chuckles) on a deserted island if they had to. But listen. It'd be hard. (Repeats.) Because Christians were designed to grow Spiritually in *small groups*. Let's think about that a second. That's new to some people. Christians were designed to grow Spiritually in *small groups*. And more than that, another benefit of small groups is they're the fastest way for Christians to grow *Spiritually*. That was true in the First Century. It's still true today, assuming – assuming! – that those small groups are in the right *structure*. There's a little thing called Organizational Structure. And that's the whole theme of these two episodes that we're presenting on small groups.

John (04:04):

That's right. And believe it or not, there are even more benefits to small groups than Spiritual growth. In fact, I had a conversation with someone yesterday that spoke to me about that very thing that we're talking about right now. Some of the other reasons, of course, that Early Christians met in small groups is that it's *quicker, easier, safer, cheaper, more confidential*. It's more *convenient*. It's more *intimate*, to meet in small groups than it is to meet in large groups. And that is still true today.

Owen (04:40):

Totally amazing. But, John. Again, I want to drive home: Of all those benefits of small groups that we've mentioned, there's only *one* of those benefits that we want our friends to focus on in this episode. And that's the fact – as we've said a couple of times – small groups are more *Spiritual* than large groups. I wonder how many Christians know that.

John (05:05):

Owen, I think probably not many! (Laughter.) And to be honest with you, for many years I didn't know that. And I'm glad to know that now. And actually experience it in my own life. But that also depends on how we define that fuzzy word "Spiritual." Because many Christians have been taught that *large* groups are Spiritual. Besides that's all they see on the Lord's Day. (Laughter.)

Owen (05:32):

That's right. And so, "What they see is what they get," as the old joke goes. And they think that "What they see" on the Lord's Day is being "Spiritual." So that's totally true. But what's worse though, is that many Christians have never heard the word "Spiritual" *defined*, right? Think about that a second. Because their leaders have never taken the time to *define* it for them. But more importantly, *we* define it here in this podcast – and in our book – we define the word "Spiritual" the way the Early Christians defined it. And to them, here's what the word "Spiritual" meant in the original Greek. It meant this:

Every Christian in a small group contributes to every other Christian in the group by expressing: One, the Fruit of the Spirit. And Two, the Gifts of the Spirit during worship meetings.

So that was a long sentence. Let me say that again: If a small group is being Spiritual, every Christian in it contributes to all the other Christians in the group by him or her expressing fruit and gifts during the meeting.

John (06:52):

Yes. And that *can't* – and *doesn't* – happen in large groups. And how do we know that? Well, we know it because it never *happens* in large groups. And it never happens in large groups because it *can't* happen in large groups. There's just a dynamic that is true for small groups that doesn't transfer into the large groups. And small groups are the best. And if you really stop and think about it, it just really makes sense. The best Organizational Structure for Christians to have *Spiritual* experiences. And since the purpose of Christianity (chuckles) *is* for Christians to have Spiritual experiences, then Christians need to meet in small groups ... whether or not they also meet in large groups, or not.

Owen (07:48):

Well, that's true, John. And that's a good point there because – as we've so often said – many Christians today are loyal to a bigger group. And there's nothing wrong with that, as long as they keep it in perspective (chuckles), and realize that for the *Spiritual* dimension to be really big in their lives, they're going to have to be in small groups. And so, we come up with this principle, then. I'll just repeat. The small group structure is the best structure for *what?* For Spiritual experiences! And *what?* Spiritual experiences are the best way to grow Spiritually! So John, like you said, Christians need to be in small groups, whether or not they attend a large group.

John (08:36):

Yeah, Owen. And this is absolutely a huge principle. And it needs to be understood by all Christians. So why don't we tell our friends a little about the *history* of Christian small groups. For example, when did Christian small groups *start?* When did they *end?* And so on and so on.

Owen (09:00):

What *happened* to them? (Chuckles.) Well you know, I've thought about this a lot, John. And when you think about it, and get right down to the brass knuckles, Christian small groups *started* on the Day of Pentecost in the First Century. Now we know that's the day that Christianity was founded. And we call that the "birthday" of Christianity. But it's also the day that Christian *small groups* were founded. So it's the "birthday" of small groups also.

John (09:33):

And the Day of Pentecost, just as a reminder, was May the 30th, in the year 30 AD. And the Holy Spirit came to earth at 9:00 AM in the morning that day and Christianity was founded. But many people don't realize that Christian small groups were also founded on that *same* day.

Owen (09:58):

That's right, John. Because one of the ideas we're trying to get across in this episode is that small groups were founded that day, too. And more specifically, they are a gift ... or a benefit ... or a structure ... that was given to us by the Holy Spirit. *People* didn't come up with that. Because immediately on that day – the Day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit had just created the first Christians – they immediately started meeting in their *homes*. And in the First Century, you might know, people did *not* meet in homes for religious purposes. That was never done. What happened? They met in the large *temples*. So both Christianity and Christian small groups were founded on that marvelous day, history-making day, the Day of Pentecost.

John (10:59):

Now, just to be clear, the Early Christians in Jerusalem *did* continue to meet in large groups in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. We read that in Scripture. Because all of the first Christians were *Jewish*. But even while doing that, they *also* met – the Bible's clear about this as well – in small groups in their homes. And over time, these home meetings became the only way Christians met worldwide.

Owen (11:30):

And you think about that, John, there was a method to that madness. There was some reason they did that. So they knew that meeting in their homes was more *Spiritual* than meeting in the temple courtyard in a group of hundreds or even thousands. But anyway, here's the important point that we need to think about. And that is that these small groups were the first *place* and the first *time* that – quote – "signs and wonders" – end quote – started among the first Christians. So it was in fact the small group Organizational Structure that gave Christians their first *Spiritual* experiences. It wasn't in the temple courtyard.

John (12:16):

Right. So I want to summarize this: The Holy Spirit gave the world *two* miracles on the Day of Pentecost, not just one. He gave us Christianity. And He gave us the *small group structure* for Christian meetings. And all Christians met, they fellowshiped, they worshiped, in small groups for the next – hear me! – three centuries.

Owen (12:42):

Bingo! Three centuries! That's right, John. And but you know, as we said, a lot of Christians, they've never heard any of these facts. And to be absolutely honest, there were many years *I* never heard them.

John (12:55):

Very true. So I think, Owen, we ought to just maybe slow down, tap the breaks a little, and tell our friends some of the *historical* evidence that proves the Early Christians met in these small groups.

Owen (13:10):

I think that's important, John. Because some people might think, "Well, I've never heard *that* before. And that's a cute idea. But you know, how do we *know* that's true?"

Well, why don't we start. You mentioned the Bible a minute ago, let's start with the *Bible* evidence. Many Christians don't realize that small groups are in fact mentioned in the Bible. And they are. Listen to this. Small groups are mentioned 30 different times – 30 different verses – in 10 different books of the ... New Testament. And what's interesting is that 12 different ancient cities are mentioned, specifically mentioned, as having small groups meeting in them. Christian small groups meeting there. And those include, for example: Antioch ... Capernaum ... Colossae ... Corinth ... and Ephesus ... and of course, Jerusalem itself.

John (14:08):

Yeah. And let's not forget Laodicea ... Miletus ... Philippi ... Rome ... Thessalonica ... and Troas.

Owen (14:17):

And I'm sure there are others, John. But, and those are just the cities that are *named* in the Bible. Think about this. There were thousands of Christian small groups in cities, towns, and villages worldwide that are *not* named in the Bible. And so it's kind of interesting that there's a whole other block of evidence. And I call that the *archeological* excavations. Whereas actual ruins – actual ruins! – of Christian home meetings, small group meetings, have been discovered in various places.

I'll just mention this too, John. The most famous and the most interesting are the ruins of *Peter's house* in Capernaum. Which I've studied for at length and visited at length. And there was a small group meeting in his home, as you know. We've discussed this in other episodes. So anyway, the ruins of small group meetings have been found in Capernaum, but also in Jerusalem and Megiddo in Israel.

Owen (15:28):

And then of course, Rome in Italy. And then the famous Dura-Europos meeting in Syria. But also Damascus in Syria. People never thought about that – where Paul had his big experience. Well, Salamis in Cyprus, and even Aqaba in Jordan. And these are just the cities where ruins have been *discovered*. Now, everybody knows First Century Christian ruins on the average are buried 20 to 30 feet under the ground. So imagine how many cities, villages, towns, today worldwide have the ruins of Christian meetings buried underground that nobody has ever discovered.

John (16:19):

I would think there must be thousands of them worldwide.

Owen (16:22):

Well you know, there would *have* to be. And, but now here's where it gets even more interesting. Let's continue. Because there's not only *Bible* evidence. And there's not only *archeological* evidence. But we have a third source of evidence proving that Christians, Early Christians, met, and fellowshiped, and worshiped in small groups.

Owen (16:46):

And that third source is the *museum* evidence. People don't think about that. Many museums worldwide have artifacts and documents in their display cases that prove the Early Christians met in small groups. And my favorite example – I've been there – but there's a museum in Rome that has fragments of First Century ancient *property records* for the city of Rome. So these would be deeds to property, and tax forms, and that kind of stuff. And what's interesting is some of these records actually list by *family* name the homes in which First Century Christian small groups met. Can you imagine that? And by the way, John. Just to say, pages 214 and 215 in our book *Saving Christianity* give all this information and even more details than we have time for. I personally urge all of our friends to read those pages.

John (17:53):

Well, here's the overriding lesson: All this evidence in Israel ... Greece ... Turkey ... Italy ... Syria ... Cyprus ... and Jordan ... proves that small groups were the original Organizational Structure in Christianity during the first three centuries of Christian history.

Owen (18:15):

Well, that's right, John. And there's another way to look at that, as we have done in earlier episodes. These home meetings were performed, you might say, by the first, approximately the first, *eight* generations of the Early Christians. This is the way those first eight generations met, and fellowshiped, and worshiped.

John (18:41):

So clearly, clearly (chuckles), the small group structure worked for Christians in the early centuries. So what *happened* to it? Why did that original structure *end*? And when did meeting in large groups in large buildings take over?

Owen (19:00):

Yeah, those are tremendous questions. (Chuckles.) I imagine a lot of our listeners at this point are sitting on the edge of their seats to hear this. Because if those small groups were so

wonderful and so marvelous, why did they *end*? See? So here's what happened. As we said, they did that for about eight generations. And then here's an important fact that we want our friends to keep in mind. The Early Christians did *not* meet in just any old type of small group. As we've said a couple of times, they met with a special *structure* that the Holy Spirit gave them on the Day of Pentecost. And we're calling that special structure in these two episodes "The Key." (Repeats.) And that structure, the "Key," was so important that it is the reason that Christianity spread worldwide in 70 years.

John (20:00):

Yeah. Okay, so that means that we want our friends to remember *two* facts before we go any further: First, the Early Christians met in *small* groups, not large groups. Second, those small groups had a special *structure*. Now all of these things are important that the Holy Spirit gave Christians on the Day of Pentecost.

Owen (20:24):

Absolutely. And all of that's important. But now, let's pick up the loose thread and find out if all that was so wonderful, what *happened* to it? And Christians should know those facts. But here's where the plot thickens. In the Fourth Century, a villain appeared on the world stage who ended the success of Christian small groups. Now in our book *Saving Christianity*, we devote two chapters to tell that story. One was chapter 3, and it had the title, "The Warlord." And then chapter 4, which had the title, "The Contamination." There was this contamination that went on.

And then we added the two episodes, Episode 4 of this podcast, which had the title, "The Murderer." (Repeats.) A man told me this week that he was reading that, listening to that one, and enjoying it. And then Episode 5, which had the title, "The Courthouses." So we have two book chapters, two podcast episodes, telling how and why Early Christian groups were ended in the Fourth Century. And it's a disaster, John, from which Christianity has really never recovered.

John (21:46):

Yeah. And more precisely, it's a disaster from which Christianity never recovered *Spiritually*. So for our friends who haven't read the book, *Saving Christianity*, who haven't had time to listen to Episodes 4 and 5 of the podcast, let's briefly tell what happened to the Early Christian Small groups.

Owen (22:08):

Okay. Yeah, and here's the story briefly: The Roman emperor Constantine came to power in the Fourth Century. And he did that by *murdering* everybody who opposed him, including his own *wife* and *son*. And then, over a period of 25 years, he gradually corrupted Christianity by founding what today we could call and think of as "Institutional Christianity." That means the *denominations* that we have today that we're all familiar with. So it was the emperor Constantine who built – hang on! – the first Christian *buildings*. It was Con ... *none* existed before that.

It was Constantine who named them – quote – "churches," a word that didn't exist before he came to power. Constantine, even for example, renamed the *first* day of the week. You know, before that the Early Christians called the first day of the week the *Lord's Day*. And they had special meals and worships on that day.

Owen (23:22):

But Constantine came along and renamed it legally. And he named it "Sun Day." And that meant a day to worship the *sun*. Because Constantine was not a Christian. He was a priest in the sun god religion. And you know, John. Some people look at me funny when I talk about the first day of the week. I call it the *Lord's Day*. And people look cross-eyed, you know, because they think it's "Sunday." But I won't use the term "Sun Day" because I don't worship the sun. I worship the Lord.

Well, the next thing he did then ... Constantine we're talking about ... he passed a law requiring all Christians to attend his new "church buildings." And he created, think about this now. This is just a brief overview. He created the "clergy," and "choirs," and "worship programs," and all the things that we see today for his new buildings. So you know we could, we could go on and all on with a long list of the damaging changes that Constantine legally mandated on Christians in the Fourth Century. But let's stop here and let our friends read about that in the book, or listen to it in the Episodes 4 and 5 for themselves.

John (24:43):

Owen, I think this is really a revelation for a lot of people that you don't ordinarily find in your history books about Constantine. So I want to summarize: It was the Roman emperor Constantine who *ended* Christian small groups. And that's no small thing, no pun intended. (Laughter.) And he did that in the Fourth Century. That's correct?

Owen (25:11):

Yeah. And just to be totally accurate about it, factually correct, as far as the pages of history. Constantine *started* that process of eliminating small groups when he founded *Institutional Christianity* and legally mandated that all Christians had to attend his new "church buildings." But what happened actually, John, if you look behind the curtain: Some Early Christians did what we were talking about earlier in the podcast at the top of the show. They *continued* to meet in their small groups even while they attended Constantine's "church buildings." Kind of like how we're saying that if they needed to, Christians could do that today – just so they put the emphasis on the small group (chuckles), and expect their *Spiritual* growth to come from the small group and not the big group.

Owen (26:19):

But so, that process of *eliminating* small groups from the pages of history happened over just a few years. Uh, what the final blow came: Constantine died. And after he died, another Fourth Century emperor came to power just as a cruel as Constantine had been. And his name was Theodosius. And he's the actual one who outlawed – who passed a *law* throughout the empire to

outlaw – small groups. In fact, in Latin that law was called the *Lex Fidei*. And after that, any Christian ... think about this ... caught attending a small group was subject to arrest, torture, imprisonment, and even in many cases, execution. And so you can imagine (chuckles), as they say in England, that "stamped paid" to small groups. That finally *ended* the Christian small groups worldwide. And they never came back. And John, today Christians *still* attend Constantine's "church buildings," and Christian small groups are virtually extinct.

John (27:30):

I wish we didn't have to say that. It still hurts every time we do say it. But there's still a piece of the puzzle, I think, that confuses people. I know it confused me for years. And that's the fact that many, many Christian congregations today *do* have small groups. Or at least, many of them have *tried* to have small groups. And so, where does that piece of the puzzle fit?

Owen (27:59):

Well that's funny, John. Because you know, that bothered (chuckles) me for many, many years. Because like you say, I've been a member of several institutional congregations – like you said – that *do* have small groups. Or at least, they've *tried* them. And so, that is a puzzle. In fact John, listen: Remember you and I have both been in congregations that tried ... that's the operative word ... *tried* to have small groups. And you and I both have watched those institutional small groups fail. So we mentioned earlier, then *why* would that be? Why do such institutional small groups fail?

Owen (28:43):

And the answer is ... and we've already covered it ... because they don't have that special *structure* that we're calling "The Lost Key" that the Holy Spirit gave Christians on the Day of Pentecost. And listen, here's what I have found. Christian small groups *succeed* when they have the "Key." And they *fail* when they don't. And that's why we call this episode "The Small Groups: The Lost Key." It's lost. It can be found. But it's been misplaced in history. And so we want our friends in Podcast Land to realize that the small groups that are started by congregations today *don't* include that "Lost Key" structure. And so they may survive a few months. But here's the point: They don't create much *Spiritual* growth. And of course that's what small groups were designed and intended to do.

John (29:45):

You know, Owen. When I think about this, isn't it interesting that in the last several decades what has been promoted is: "*Bigger is Better*." (Laughter.) The larger, the more people that you can gather in a certain place, and the term "megachurch" came to be. And when you're studying what we're studying and talking about here, and then you contrast it with that, we just see how far (chuckles) off we got our bearings off there. So let's tell our friends – this is huge – in Podcast Land what "The Lost Key" *is*.

Owen (30:25):

Yeah, well we do need to look at that carefully. And again, let's say to our listeners, to our friends in Podcast Land, right now we're talking about material that's in chapter 14 of our book, *Saving Christianity*. In fact, the title of that chapter is, "The Small Groups." But John, there's ... I think an interesting ... it changed my life ... there's an interesting section in that chapter 14. A sub ... I guess you'd call it a subsection in the chapter, called "The Hologram Story." (Repeats.) It's on pages 230 through 232 of the book. And I think rather than just talking, if I quickly read our friends "The Hologram Story," that might make a big difference or might explain what we're trying to say. So let me just quit talking for a moment and read a couple or three paragraphs here of the hologram story:

Owen (31:33):

"Some years ago," it says, "I was visiting a laboratory in a Midwest aerospace company. And I noticed a man at a workbench adjusting some weird looking lights and mirrors. So I stopped to watch him. And in a moment he saw me watching, and he said, 'Have you ever seen a hologram?' And he pronounced it like the word Hollywood, a *hologram*. And of course this was many years ago. I said, no, I've never even heard of one. He said, 'Then let me show you one.' And with that, he picked up a large piece of black plastic that looked like a photographic negative. And he handed it to me and he said, 'Hold this up to the light and tell me what you see.' So I took it and held it up to the light in the top of the ceiling. And I saw the image, a large image, of a jet fighter plane.

Owen (32:36):

"So I said, why, I see a jet fighter. And he said, 'Exactly. Now watch this.' And he took a pair of scissors and he sniped off a teeny-weeny corner of that big black negative. And he clamped that teeny corner in a pair of locking tweezers, and handed it to me. And he said, 'Okay, now hold this up to the light and tell me what you see.' So I took the tweezers with that little snippet of black in it, held it up to the light, and I saw the very *same* jet fighter. And wow, I said, I *still* see the jet fighter. He said, 'Precisely. Because in a hologram' ... let me repeat this now ... 'in a hologram you see the *whole* picture in the *smallest* piece.'"

Owen (33:34):

And I've never forgotten that experience in that lab so many years ago. And John here's how the Hologram Principle applies to small groups. The biggest mistake traditional congregations make today when they set up small groups is this: They set them up as *mini-congregations*. (Repeats.) They snip off a tiny piece of the parent congregation, they move it into somebody's home, and they call it a "small group." And then they operate that snippet the *same* way they operate the parent congregation.

Owen (34:19):

They give that small group a human leader – usually it's the pastor, associate pastor, or some other authority figure. And then they give that leader an approved agenda. And that outlines everything that's going to happen. They give that leader an approved list of songs from an approved song book. Then they give the leader an approved lesson plan from an approved text-

book or video. And then they give the leader a list of announcements to be made each week about things that are coming up in the parent congregation.

Owen (34:57):

And finally (chuckles), and I've actually seen this. They give the leader a *basket* to pass around to collect an offering for the parent congregation. And so it goes. You get the idea. But that *isn't* a small group. At least not in First Century terms. That's a *hologram* of the parent congregation. That's a *mini-congregation*. And so I'm putting my book down. And so, John. "The Lost Key" that we're talking about is that special small group *structure* that the Holy Spirit gave Christians that the Roman emperors outlawed. And it doesn't look anything like what we have today in our large groups in our large buildings.

John (35:47):

So Owen, and I want to summarize: "The Lost Key" is the special small group *structure*. And we can't ... you just can't emphasize that enough ... that Christians used for meeting, fellowshiping, worshipping, in Early Christian history. And now that key is "lost" because congregations don't use it anymore.

Owen (36:16):

Yeah. They don't use it anymore, John. They don't even know it *existed*. To be totally honest with you, I think that many Christians don't even have any *idea* how the Early Christians met and worshiped. They just assume that the Early Christians met and worshiped the way all Christians do today. They drive to a big building. Park their car and go in, to sit in a pew, watch a program, ya-ya-ya. You know how that goes. And they think *that's* what Christians always did. It's kind of (chuckles) amazing, isn't it? But so ... what ... since congregations today don't know about that structure, and when they do try to start a small group, they structure it like a *mini-congregation*. But here's what ... I've heard this, John, probably 50 times ... then when the small groups fail, what do the leaders say? They say, "Well, it's obvious small groups don't work. Boy, we'll never try that again!"

John (37:21):

Yeah. So the basic problem is that ... is what congregations call "small groups" today are *nothing* like what the Early Christians called small groups.

Owen (37:32):

Totally, totally, nothing. And so, if you had to put your finger, John, on the big mistake that's happening. The way we do small groups today, and you and I both tried it, there's too much *human* control. They're too rigid. They're too planned. And that's the complete opposite of the relaxed, informal, Spiritual, happy, small groups that the Early Christians enjoyed. And guess whose fault that is? *Constantine's*. Not ours. So let's don't any of us go on a guilt trip.

John (38:08):

Yeah. I think we can say it this way: God *changed* world history on the day of Pentecost by creating Christians and then by having Christians leave those stone temples to form small groups.

Owen (38:22):

And then what happened? Eight generations later, Constantine changed world history *back* by forcing Christians to leave their small groups and move *back* into stone temples.

John (38:37):

Yeah, and Owen, I want ... we're going to pause here. I think we've covered a lot in this episode. It's a lot to chew on. And as we approach the end of it, I know that you've personally been a member of small groups that *used* "The Lost Key." In other words, they *used* this special small group structure that we're talking about. So why don't we wind down this episode by: Tell us a little about your experience in those kinds of small groups.

Owen (39:10):

That's a good point, John. You know, you used it a minute ago. But there's a much abused term (chuckles) that I see in TV commercials. And it's the term "*life-changing*." (Repeats.) Everything I see, from diets, to exercise bikes, to pillows, is "life-changing." But John, to use my phrase, to be "deathbed honest" the only thing I've ever done that was *really* life-changing was being a member of small groups that were structured with that First Century structure that we're talking about. And over the years, looking back on it now, as I've made various career moves to various cities, I've been a member of probably a dozen groups that *used* that "Lost Key" structure. But now to be fair, you and I have both been members of small groups that did *not* use the First Century structure.

Owen (40:10):

And I'd like to paraphrase a 1930s actress by the name of Sophie Tucker. She was very famous years ago. And to paraphrase her, something she used to say, I'll put it this way:

"I've been in small groups with the *right* structure. And I've been in small groups with the *wrong* structure. And I can tell you, being in small groups with the *right* structure is better."

John (40:40):

Well, Owen, that kind of begs the question. What is the big difference? Just the big difference that you saw between those two structures?

Owen (40:49):

That's a good question, John. Well, let's see. I guess just if ... just like if you walked into room. And one room had a group *without* the structure. And one room had a group *with* the structure. And you were just visiting and walking around. What would you instantly see? And one of the things I always noticed that the small groups *without* the right structure are usually stiffer, more formal. Some of the members are always a little uncomfortable. Some of the members are shy, embarrassed, and sit quietly. And they're tightly controlled. There's a *human* leader – usually the pastor, associate pastor, an elder, somebody like that – that's standing and telling everybody what to do and what's going to happen. And there's no expression, that's the big one, there is no expression of the supernatural Gifts and Fruit of the Spirit. So to put it in this term, nothing very *Spiritual* happens in that group with the wrong structure.

John (42:02):

Right. We've got to quickly go to the *right* structure, Owen. I can't take it. (Laughter.)

Owen (42:07):

So now we go in the other room. And we look at the other small group. And it *has* the structure. And what do we instantly see? Well, the people are relaxed, they're happy, they're informal, they're comfortable. Nobody's shy or embarrassed. There's *no* human leader standing at the front telling everybody what to do. The *Holy Spirit* guides the group with supernatural power. And most importantly ... here's where the worm turns ... there *is* an expression of the Fruit and the Gifts. So a lot of *Spiritual* things are happening.

John (42:45):

Huh. So did the group having the *right* structure, did it last over time?

Owen (42:52):

You know. That's a great question, John. And you may be surprised at the answer. But these small groups in my experience – it may be different somewhere else. But in my travels, these groups with the *right* structure do indeed last over time. As I've often said, I was in one such group for 12 years. I was in another such group for five years. And another one for four years. Of course, these were in different cities and I left them because of career moves.

John (43:26):

So, small groups using the *right* structure can last for years and be *Spiritual* the whole time.

Owen (43:34):

Indeedly. And that last phrase was the most important. You know, John, people don't think about this. In the First Century, or Second, and Third Centuries, the early groups *lasted*. You know the apostle Peter lived ... after the Day of Pentecost he stayed in Jerusalem. He was an elder in Jerusalem. And he was a member of small groups in Jerusalem for 25 years before he began to travel to Rome and other cities later in life.

Owen (44:10):

So yeah, they can last. But you know, John. You just mentioned that we've given our friends so much to chew on. I think maybe if we stop this first episode about here and give our friends a chance to digest everything we've said – read the book chapters, and listen to some of the other episodes that we had about Constantine. And then our next episode coming up is going to be a follow-on episode. It'll be Episode number 30. And it's going to have the type of the small groups using the "Key," using the "Lost Key." And we're going to discuss in that episode exactly how to do it, and how to meet and worship the way Christians did before Constantine.

John (45:02):

Hey, that's going to be exciting, Owen. I'm looking forward to it.

Owen (45:05):

Yeah, me too. Well, but John, right now, I see the big clock on the wall is saying that it's time to wrap up this episode.

John (45:14):

Yeah, and I want to remind our friends that this is Episode 29. And of course there is a script and a recording of it on our website. Hope that you will avail yourself to that. It's www.goSCpod.com. That's G-O-S-C-P-O-D.com.

Owen (45:35):

Super-duper, John. And I'm looking forward, and I think our intrepid producer is looking forward, to this next follow-up episode. But in the meantime, this is Owen Allen ...

John (45:50):

... and this is John Shields, speaking for me and for Shannon Wolfe, our producer ...

Owen (45:54):

... and we're all going to say together: May the God of our fathers bless you, and keep you, and guide you, and protect, you until we meet again.

Owen and John (46:20):

Owen and John end the episode.