

19. Developing Structure to Develop Spiritual Families

In John 1:12, we read, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” In this verse, and many others, we see that we become a part of the family of God at the moment we place our trust in Christ. This is a very great privilege. In the physical life, we see that families often have children, parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and occasionally one or two more generations. Children that have two or three generations older than them have the opportunity to learn many things from these older generations. The same can be true in spiritual families.

In Matthew 13:52, we read, “Then He said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.’” Since the word translated “instructed” is the same form of the word translated “Make Disciples” in Matthew 28:19-20, we see that one who has become a disciple is defined as one who is the head of a spiritual household. In the time of the New Testament, a family would often include three or more generations, plus servants. The person who led this family was a householder, or the head of the household. By putting that information into this context, we see that, as a Christian grows and matures, he or she should mature and become the head of a spiritual household.

We see that the early church functioned as many smaller spiritual families. Acts 1:15 says there were a hundred and twenty disciples, so that made it possible to have a hundred and twenty spiritual families. Acts 2:42 and 46 tell us how they functioned as spiritual families. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers...So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.” In these verses, we see that the early Christians fellowshiped together; they studied the teachings of Christ together; they broke bread together; they prayed together; they did this daily; they did these things in the temple; and they did these things in their homes. The result was that they were of one accord and were filled with gladness and simplicity of heart. Verses 44 and 45 also show us that they met the physical needs of one another. They were learning to function, as spiritual families, in small groups.

Paul referred to part of his spiritual family in 1 Corinthians 4:14-17, where we read: “I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” When Paul said that he had begotten the Corinthians through the Gospel, he was saying that he had taken the responsibility of a spiritual parent to help them grow and mature.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:1, we read, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then, 1 Thessalonians 2:7 says, “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12 goes on to say, “You are

witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” Paul, Silas, and Timothy were spiritual parents who provided the love of a nursing mother, and the example of a godly father, to those new Christians to help them grow.

First, healthy physical families teach their children. Deuteronomy 6:7-8 says, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” In these verses, we see that teaching is continuous and throughout the day. Second, healthy families have parents who provide a good example for their children to learn to imitate. An example of healthy physical parents is mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The same should be true in spiritual families. New Christians, and immature Christians, need someone to regularly explain the Word of God to them and answer their questions, so they can begin to understand and apply Biblical principles to their daily lives. They also need mature Christians who will walk alongside them, and provide an example to imitate, as they go through life. This will only happen as mature Christians take the responsibility to invest their time and lives in the lives of new and immature Christians, just as physical parents invest their lives and time in the lives of their physical children. That is why every church needs to develop a structure that will help spiritual families to form and function effectively.

We see that the hundred and twenty disciples, mentioned in Acts 1:15, took that responsibility to function as smaller spiritual families to help the new Christians begin to grow in Acts 2:42-47. We see that the teams that traveled with Paul took that same responsibility, to help new Christians grow, in the various churches they established. The results are clearly seen in the New Testament as the church spread rapidly, because Christians grew and matured and then became the heads of spiritual families.

In the book of Acts, there is no mention of disciples from Acts 1:15 to Acts 6:1, a period of six or seven years. Then, Acts 6:1 says, “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” Then, Acts 6:7 says, “Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” These verses show that the number of leaders of spiritual households multiplied in Acts 6:1. The leaders dealt with the problem mentioned in Acts 6:1 by increasing the number of men on the leadership team of the church, with the new leaders of the leadership team all being Hellenists. The result was that the number of leaders of spiritual households multiplied greatly. All of the new Christians had spiritual families to help them grow.

When the early Christians were scattered to other areas, because of persecution, the church at Jerusalem also took the responsibility to help those Christians grow. We are given an example of that fact as they sent Barnabas to Antioch to help the new Christians there in their spiritual growth.

Barnabas immediately realized that there were enough new Christians that he needed to form a spiritual parenting team to help him. Acts 11:25-26 says, “Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Here, we see that many spiritual families developed in Antioch.

Paul and Barnabas also made it their priority to develop heads of spiritual households as they established churches in other areas. Acts 14:21-23 says, “And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” In these verses, we see that they reached people and continued to help them grow until there were many who were able to become heads of spiritual families. In fact, enough heads of spiritual families developed that they were able to help part of them continue to mature to the point that they were able to appoint a group of elders to lead each church and train other spiritual parents.

In Acts 19:9, we see that Paul, and the team with him, developed a structure in Ephesus very similar to what they did in other cities to equip disciples to lead spiritual families. That verse says, “But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.” Because of the heat in the area, most businesses closed for a couple hours during the hottest part of the day. That made it possible for Paul, and the team, to be able to make use of a school to have a daily place and time to teach all those who were leading spiritual households.

However, this discussion of questions was only a part of the training of those who were leading spiritual households. Later, while talking to the leaders that had developed in the church at Ephesus, Paul said, in Acts 20:20-21, “How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, we see that Paul, and the rest of the team with him, combined their daily discussions, with those heads of spiritual households, with on-the-job training, as they took these people with them as they shared the message of repentance and faith with people in their homes.

Christ worked in a mighty way as each of the early churches developed a structure to develop spiritual families and mature disciples to lead those spiritual families. May the Lord richly bless you as you develop mature disciples to lead spiritual families and develop the structure to help every Christian grow and mature.