

6. Developing the Ministry of Each Christian – Part 2

In our last topic, we saw that church structure is really for the purpose of helping every Christian learn to function as an effective part of the body. In far too many churches, the work of the ministry is carried on by a very small group, and the rest of the body has never learned to function. Christ wants every Christian to learn to function effectively, so each part can do its share. That will be the focus of our topic today.

In Matthew 29:19-20, we have what is known as our Great Commission. Those verses say, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.” In these verses, we have one command “Make Disciples” and three participles that tell us how to carry out that command: going, baptizing, and teaching.

The various forms of the word “disciple” are used two hundred and seventy-four times in the New Testament. However, the various forms of that word are never used after Acts 21:16. Since that is our Great Commission, we certainly need to ask the question, “Why is the word “disciple” never used after Acts 21:16?” The reason disciple is never used after Acts 21:16 is very simple. The Jews had a good understanding of the word, but the word meant nothing to the Gentiles. Let us look at why we can say the Jews had a good understanding of the word.

Christ used the word disciple when He warned the scribes and Pharisees of judgment. Matthew 23:15 says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” Here, we see that the first thing the Pharisees did was win a proselyte (a Gentile) to Judaism. However, that was just the beginning. Once he had become a convert to Judaism, we see that the process began to train him how to become a good Pharisee. The Pharisees took this convert along with them until he had developed the attitudes of a proud Pharisee. They took him along and showed him how to make other converts to Judaism from among the Gentiles. The result was that he became twice as much a son of hell as the Pharisees who were showing him how to be “a good Pharisee”.

Christ gave His definition of a disciple in Matthew 13:52. There 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.” The word “instructed” is the same word as “Make Disciples” in Matthew 28:19-20. Here, we see that a disciple:

- has become the head of a spiritual household (able to lead a Bible study group)
- has a treasure (the Word of God)
- is about to bring out of that treasure things new (is continuing to grow)
- is about to bring out of that treasure things old (teach the basics of Christianity)

The Hebrew system was to develop people by showing them how to become a disciple. The rest of the Roman Empire followed the Greek system where an instructor told people what to do. The

contrast is clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 4:15-16. Those verses say, “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.” An instructor was a slave who raised a child by severe discipline. The word is only used two other times in the New Testament, in Galatians 3:24-25. There we see that the law was our schoolmaster (instructor) to bring us to God, but after we come to God we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

In contrast to an instructor, Paul said that he, and the team with him, had become like a spiritual father to the Corinthians. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, Paul, Silas, and Timothy said they had become like spiritual parents to the Christians in Thessalonica. They had provided the loving care of a nursing mother, and the example of a godly father. The result was that the Thessalonians became examples to help others grow. 1 Thessalonians 1:7 says, “So that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.” The Thessalonians had learned to lead others, by their example, instead of just telling them what to do. Throughout the Epistles, the love and example of spiritual parents is the model, because the Gentiles had no concept of the word “disciple”.

This brings us to the question, “How do we develop church structure so that new and growing Christians have loving examples to follow, instead of instructors who just tell them what to do?” That question takes us right back to the day the church began. Acts 2:42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” We have seen that, from the day the church began, they gathered in small groups where they focused on: the apostles’ doctrine (studying what became the New Testament) and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

However, Acts 2:46 gives us a real key to how they helped these new converts become disciples. That verse says, “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.” The hundred and twenty disciples were going to the homes of the new believers and breaking bread with them. The hundred and twenty were doing this daily. The hundred and twenty were modeling both love and example, because they were filled with gladness (exceeding joy). The hundred and twenty were modeling singleness of heart (unity). This time in homes also provided opportunities to show new believers how to share the Gospel with their extended families, as the hundred and twenty provided an example of how to share the Gospel with the families. We know that sharing with family members was happening, because the next verse says that the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

As small groups met in homes for Bible study, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, the hundred and twenty were also able to demonstrate the new commandment of Christ. John 13:34-35 says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The hundred and twenty had seen Christ demonstrate His love to them. Now, they were showing the new believers, by their love, how to love others.

Each person, in each of the small groups, was learning how to share the Gospel with others. The word “disciples” was not used between Acts 1:15 and Acts 6:1. That was a period of about six or seven years. Then, in Acts 6:1, we read that the number of disciples multiplied. Acts 6:7 says that the number of disciples multiplied greatly. Soon, persecution came, and Acts 8:1 says many of the Christians were scattered, but the apostles remained in Jerusalem. Acts 8:4 says, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” The difference between addition and multiplication is this. If you only develop the dynamic people, you will only have addition. If you develop every Christian, and show every Christian how to share the Gospel and then help new Christians begin to grow, you will have multiplication. (If you develop no one, a new church will never develop and an existing church will die.)

Acts 9:31 gives the results just a few years later. That verse says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” In Acts 2, the believers multiplied. In Acts 6, the number who had become disciples multiplied. In Acts 9, the number of churches multiplied. The churches knew how to develop the structure that had developed in Jerusalem in Acts 2:42 and 46.

By comparing Acts 2:41-47 with 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, we see that Paul, Silas, and Timothy did exactly the same things with the new believers in Thessalonica. However, they used the words that speak of the tender care of a nursing mother and the godly example of a loving father instead of using the word “disciple”. Because they were a team that worked together, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were each able to be leaders of several small groups of Christians.

We see how Paul, Silas, and Timothy showed a gentle attitude of love, in verses 7-9. They showed the care of a nursing mother. They showed their longing and concern out of a heart of love. They shared their lives. They shared their heart and passion. They treated the new Christians as beloved children. They worked hard and long, including both day and night. They made sure they were not a burden to the new Christians.

We see how Paul, Silas, and Timothy provided an example to follow in verses 10-12. They said that the Thessalonians had been witnesses and seen their attitudes and actions. They provided examples of holy lives. They provided examples of upright lives. They provided examples of blameless lives. They showed the Thessalonians how to be examples to others. They came alongside them to encourage and strengthen them. They provided comfort. They shared with them how to grow in their lives, so their lives would give a good report of what Christ had done to change their lives. They had been like fathers who were showing their children how to walk worthy of God.

As we compare these passages, we see that making disciples is spiritual parenting (or to put it the other way, spiritual parenting is how we make disciples). The early church developed a structure that made it possible for every new Christian to have a spiritual parent who would provide the love and example needed to help each new Christian become a reproducing Christian. That is what the Lord has called each of us to do. May the Lord richly bless you as you provide an example that

demonstrates the love of Christ to new Christians.