

Discipleship Through the Church

Introduction

We live in trying times that make **Christian Discipleship** an imperative. International events foreshadow the coming conflict that will culminate in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ to establish His eternal Kingdom, while cultural changes pressure Believers to abandon their Biblical beliefs in order to conform to worldly principles.

The clock is ticking and night will soon be upon us when our work as Christ's ambassadors will cease. It is therefore imperative that as Christ's Church we prioritize our ministries, in order to complete the task we have been commissioned by our Lord to do: "to make disciples of all the nations".

The Dilemma

The advent of the professional Christian, gifted Believers paid to minister, be they Pastors, Evangelists, Counselors, Administrators, Teachers, etc., has had the undesirable effect of detaching a great number of lay Christians from active involvement. As Dr. Howard Hendricks once wryly quoted in a speech on Leadership, "Our Pastors are paid to be good and our people are good for nothing!"

This has had the most disastrous affect on evangelism as Believers have excused their lack of involvement with the thinking, "Let the Pastor bring people to Christ. That's *his* job!" Nothing could be further from the truth!

It is time for the Church to return to the pattern laid out in Scripture. It is not the task of these gifted Believers to take upon themselves the entire ministry, but to equip the members of Christ's Church to be involved together in ministry. But this will never happen without someone catching the Vision of what can transpire when we return to the Biblical blueprint.

The Vision

Imagine your church in which every member is actively involved in fulfilling Christ's Great Commission in the capacity God's Spirit enables them. Picture them *winning* their family members, friends, co workers and acquaintances to Christ, and bringing them to church in order that they may be *built up* through the church's teaching and equipping ministry. Then imagine these new Believers being *sent out* to win their own friends and acquaintances to Christ, then bringing them to be built up as well!

This process of Believers "Winning people to Christ, Building people in Christ and Sending them to win, build and send still others for Christ" is called **Spiritual Multiplication**. It is a Discipleship Principle taught by our Lord Himself when He first called Peter to become a "fisher of men", *not* just a Believer in Christ. Can you imagine what can happen in a church when every Believer catches this Vision? The 'gates of hell' will not be able to prevail against it!

Win, Build and Send

I have personally witnessed the explosion that can take place when Believers begin to take upon themselves the responsibilities of ministry. In Papua New Guinea, we started an eight week class on Basic Christian Living and Evangelism with 30 students. Every weekend, we applied what we learned with outreaches in the market places. (It is amazing how much more you can learn about living by faith by going out and sharing your faith in the community) After completing the 8 week class, we added an 8 week Intermediate level class on Spiritual Growth while simultaneously training a new group in the Basic level class. Eight weeks later, we added a third level on the Bible Study Method while simultaneously teaching the Basic and Intermediate levels. (The **Discipleship Study Books** available at BibleStudyCD.com may be used as the curriculum for the three levels of a Training Course)

As students completed each level, they had the option of retaking the same level for further learning, or moving to the next level. After completing the third level, they were offered various classes that would contribute further to their spiritual growth, such as Inductive Studies, Leadership Development, How To classes on Teaching, Counseling, Discipleship Training, etc. Those who expressed an interest and possessed the abilities were trained to teach each level of the curriculum, and allowed to teach the classes themselves.

Within a year, the original group of 30 grew to more than 200, but because of the growing group of lay trainers, my sole responsibility became transportation. I'll admit that it felt strange standing outside the classrooms watching former students teach, but extremely rewarding to see how enthusiastic they were as they developed the gifts God gave them.

Our time to leave for furlough arrived at this time and I left this ministry in the hands of the lay leaders. When I returned one year later, I discovered that they not only kept the training going, but had started four other training centers in various parts of the city. On top of this, they had taken the training course into their villages. They had caught God's Vision for their country, for their world and for their lives!

When I was invited to share at a camp put on by one of the new training groups, I was surprised and delighted to find that not only did I not recognize any of them, but that none of them knew who I was. I learned that **Spiritual Multiplication** did not require a charismatic leader to maintain its momentum, but only faithful Christians obedient to Christ's Word and dependent upon His Spirit.

Principles versus Programs

A **Principle** is a statement expressing a fundamental purpose and/or standard. A **Program** is an organized activity based on a fundamental purpose.

It is important to comprehend the relationship between *Principles* and *Programs*. Local churches, like any organization, can lose sight of their purpose and become lost in a proliferation of programs. When we lose sight of where we're supposed to be going, busyness often becomes a substitute. But the only one being deceived is 'us'! At this point, it is better to stop and return to the original mandate to: "make disciples of all the nations" by "winning people to Christ, building them up in Christ and sending them out to win, build and send still others for Christ".

This mandate from our Lord becomes the Principle by which all our Programs must find its reason for being. Like the proverbs "Form follows Function" and "Never let the cart get before the Horse", Principles must always *precede* Programs. Problems arise when Programs outlive their intended purpose but continue on because '*we have always done it that way*'. The first step in aligning our Programs with our Principles is to stop and analyze each Program to ensure that it is fulfilling its purpose based on the stated Principle. This can be a very painful process, and result in hurt feelings, but if Christ's original blueprint for His Church is to become a reality, this difficult task must be undertaken.

Just as a surgeon excises or repairs damaged tissue, so the leaders of the church must be willing to cease or change Programs that have lost their reason for existence. The Principle of Christ's Great Commission must become pre eminent if the church is ever to realize its reason for being.

Using Programs to Build a Movement

There are countless church Programs available today. The important thing is to ensure that every Program fulfills the Principle to "make disciples" through "winning people to Christ, building them up in Christ and sending them out to win, build and send still others for Christ".

The variety of available Programs reflect the variety of needs within any congregation. Differences in age, sex, marital status, personal situations or issues, all play a part in determining which Programs will best develop Believers toward Spiritual Maturity and an active involvement in the guiding Principle ~ the Great Commission of our Lord.

NOTE: Care must be taken to guard against seeing Programs as an end in themselves instead of a means to a greater end, as well as members viewing their own welfare as the primary goal of church Programs. We live to Know, Love and Serve our Lord, not ourselves!

An example of a Program is the Discipleship Study Books. These were developed to help Christians fulfill our Lord's Great Commission. But they are simply a Program, among many others. In the course of my ministry, I have utilized studies developed by several Christian organizations, schools and denominations. All of them are Programs as well, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. I encourage the use of a study curriculum to teach and train Believers in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. However, we should never view any of these studies as an end in themselves, but simply a means to build Believers toward Spiritual Growth, in order that they may be sent out to Win, Build and Send others. The choice of which study you utilize is your option. Becoming involved in building others in Christ is not.

When each church member catches the Vision and understands the Principle that guides the Programs of the whole church, a **Movement of Discipleship** is developed. Then each member supports, not the Programs of the church, but the overarching Principle of making disciples and reaching the world for Christ!

**"The Main Thing
is to Keep the Main Thing
the Main Thing!"**