

## IT TAKES A FAMILY

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In the first article on this topic<sup>1</sup> I made the point that the making of disciples is the primary mission of the church. The Lord's great commission (Matt. 28:19-20) could be paraphrased: "Going to the people groups of this world, evangelizing them, baptizing them, teaching them everything I've taught you—*make them into true disciples.*" A disciple is the finished product of the church's activity. We are in the disciple making business.

We also concluded that a disciple is a "totally dedicated, mature, well rounded, Christ-like believer." This paper will focus on how to go about producing disciples. I think one of the best ways to understand this process is by using the family as the model for optimum growth in grace.

### ***The Family Model***

The Christian life is most often presented in scripture using analogies associated with the family. We are "born again,"<sup>2</sup> start out as "newborn babies"<sup>3</sup> "grow" to be children,<sup>4</sup> and eventually to full maturity.<sup>5</sup> We have spiritual parents,<sup>6</sup> and are in a "family" of believers.<sup>7</sup> The same kinds of things necessary for a baby to grow to maturity in the physical realm are essential in the process of growing spiritually mature disciples.

### ***A Healthy Baby***

The first question to a new father making the calls from the hospital is "How did it go? Are the mother and the baby OK?" The basic health of the newborn is foundational for all the growth to maturity envisioned. It is the same with newborn babes in Christ. The convert must truly be "born again" (John 3:6-7). He has to be regenerated by the Spirit of God (Eph. 2:4-5). He must have the new nature implanted in him or he will never grow to spiritual maturity.

When a person is truly born again he will have a God implanted "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). His goal will be to please God (2 Cor. 5:9), and seek "His Kingdom" (Matt. 6:33). He will have a natural desire for the Word of God (1 Pet. 2:2) and an attraction to the people of God (1 John 3:14). This will lead naturally to a commitment to Christ and the "means of grace." Those converted on Pentecost "*devoted* themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."<sup>8</sup>

Healthy newborns will crave mother's milk, affection, and the protection provided by the family. Healthy newborn babes in Christ will instinctively seek to grow in him. If a so-called "convert" has no interest in pleasing God, learning His Word, crying to Him in prayer, or joining with others in worship, then we have to conclude that they are not truly born again. Furthermore,

all attempts at discipleship will fail because the raw material isn't there. "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" and you can't make a disciple out of an unconverted "natural man" (Rom. 8:7)!

So the first step in discipleship is to be as sure as possible the person has truly repented and trusted in Christ alone for salvation. Furthermore, when there is persistent apathy and resistance to spiritual disciplines in so-called "converts", they may not really be born again!<sup>9</sup>

### ***Devoted Parents***

Babies and little children cannot survive, let alone thrive, without someone older to feed, protect, train and mentor them. The best scenario is two loving, devoted, and committed parents. Likewise, the discipleship process requires some mature believers who consider it their responsibility to care for and nurture new babes in Christ as a parent cares for his or her child.

Jesus viewed the twelve disciples as his "children" (John 13:33). Paul and John used the same terminology referring to those they were responsible for in the Lord.<sup>10</sup> Jesus also viewed Himself as the shepherd and all disciples as His sheep (John 10:11-16). He commissioned Peter to feed the sheep and the lambs (John 21:15-17). Elders are overseers (bishops) expected to "feed the church of God."<sup>11</sup> Paul described his ministry to the Thessalonians as a mother sacrificially devoted to her children (1 Thess. 2:7-8).

For Christians to grow to maturity they must have spiritual parents that are devoted to them and who have a sense of responsibility for them. These people must sacrificially give themselves to protect, guide, feed and train these new babes. The pastor/teachers and elders are specially commissioned to do this;<sup>12</sup> but all believers who have reached a level of maturity should see themselves as responsible for the younger siblings in the family (Col. 3:16).

Furthermore, there are many one-on-one mentoring relationships described in the Bible, as Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, and Barnabas and Mark. These apprenticeships accelerate growth just as a personal coach, trainer, or devoted teacher does. All mature Christians should see it as their responsibility to be training and discipling less mature believers. New believers need "parents" to grow to maturity!

### ***The Right Atmosphere***

A functional family is a place where each member is respected, protected, loved and welcomed. "Family" is where you are fully known yet fully loved. You can "be yourself," "let your hair down," and relax because there is a strong, loving commitment to one another. You feel secure because you belong to the family.

The first New Testament believers instinctively banded together into one big family. Luke writes:

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Everyday they continue to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:44-46).

The general epistles assume a close-knit community of believers in Corinth, Philippi, etc. The apostles emphasize unity, love, forgiveness, acceptance, peace—all the virtues necessary for a functional, healthy family.<sup>13</sup> The “one another” passages<sup>14</sup> and the “body” analogy<sup>15</sup> also reinforce the need for family type interdependence and love for spiritual growth to occur.

The best atmosphere for spiritual growth is the warm, loving, safe atmosphere of a committed community of believers. We must remove the toxic air of bitterness, suspicion, censorious judging, backbiting and cold heartedness. We must proactively develop the attitude of welcoming inclusion, respect and forbearance so that new believers will feel free to be themselves. We should not expect dysfunctional church families to produce healthy, spiritual adults (Ga. 5:15)!

### ***Intimate Community***

Families live together in close proximity. The effective training of children involves modeling by the parent and older siblings in the context of shared life experience (Deut. 6:6-9). Most of the things we learn about life in our families are “caught not taught.”

The Master’s “plan of discipleship” was to include the “twelve” in His life and ministry in an intimate way (Mark 3:14). They heard Him teach, saw Him heal, and watched Him respond to notorious sinners, curious seekers and hostile enemies. They learned about salvation, God the Father, what it is to love and how to minister to people by observation and close interaction with Him.

The first groups of believers were in regular daily, intimate contact, sharing their lives and their resources. “Every day they continued to meet together...broke bread in their homes and ate together.”<sup>16</sup> This was communal living that led to genuine “community.”

“In this remarkable relationship, Christians shared each other’s hurts, weaknesses, personal problems, material needs, aspirations, prayer concerns, and victories. They associated in a climate of acceptance, openness, encouragement, assistance, support, and trust. They became more truly brothers and sisters than if they had been born of the same human parents. It was as though their lives were welded together.”<sup>17</sup>

As churches were established believers assembled regularly in homes.<sup>18</sup> These “house churches” were probably small groups that met for encouragement, training, sharing, prayer and fellowship (Heb. 10:24-25). Paul’s ministry included a public and “house to house” exhortation and training (Acts 20:20). He also opened his heart and shared his own soul with those he ministered to.<sup>19</sup> The fellowship (*koinonia*) of the first century church involved committed, Christ-centered communion and honest communication. “True community is when the ‘masks’ come off,

conversation gets deep, hearts get vulnerable, lives are shared, accountability is invited and tenderness flows.”<sup>20</sup>

Small groups provide the context where believers can express loving care, model godliness, and use their spiritual gifts to build up the body (Eph. 4:16). Bringing Christians to maturity requires that they intentionally commit themselves to consistent fellowship in some kind of intimate group where they can be vulnerable, accountable and encouraged in the Christian life. This experience of genuine community is the quality most often missing in the contemporary fundamental church. Joe Ellis states:

“Church activities are often so formally arranged that relationships go no deeper than human civility. Functions become a kind of religious art form for the exercise of musical talent, oratory, and ritual. People fulfill their responsibilities as Christians by the simple fact of attending. Members know each other only casually, maintaining “white-glove” distance, which consists of polite greetings and small talk.”<sup>21</sup>

We must take seriously this weakness, and restructure the modern church in order to provide this important element of discipleship—intimate community.

### **Truth is Communicated**

It is in a family that most of the core values and convictions about life are communicated. Domestic and social skills, attitudes towards work and others, and a basic worldview are all passed on in the family.

In the family of God the values and truths about life come from the Scriptures. Disciples are learners and the core curriculum is Scripture. Jesus was known as “the Teacher” because He was constantly communicating the truths of the Kingdom (Matt. 4:23). He commissioned the apostles to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:20).

The Pentecost converts “continued steadfastly in the apostle’s *doctrine*” (Acts 2:41). Teaching and praying was the primary function of the apostles (Acts 4:2; 6:4). Paul preached and taught the Word of God wherever he went (Acts 11:26; 14:1; etc.). He urges elders to *teach* (2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:2) older women to *teach* the younger (Titus 2:4), pastors to *teach* and preach (Titus 2:1; 2 Tim. 4:2) and all believers to *teach* one another (Col. 3:16). Furthermore, Paul’s constant warnings about false doctrine and false teachers show how critical pure Bible doctrine is in the development of disciples.<sup>22</sup> Perverted, toxic doctrine leads to defective, deceived and diseased disciples.<sup>23</sup>

To produce Christ-like disciples the “*pure milk of the word*” must be fed to them (1 Pet. 2:2). The “rules of the house” in the family of God must be based on the standards of Scripture (Rom. 16:17). One of the marks of a true disciple is continuance in Christ’s word (John 8:31). They must be taught pure doctrine in order to continue in it! Correct doctrine is the skeleton, the backbone of a true disciple.

## **Discipline Practiced**

Every effective family unit holds family members accountable to certain standards of behavior. Disobedience, misbehavior and irresponsibility are rebuked and/or punished.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus gave instructions about disciplining unrepentant siblings in the church (Matt. 18:16-17). Paul also assumed that the church at Corinth had the right, and capacity, to “judge those inside” the church (1 Cor. 5:12). Pastors and elders are called “bishops” with the authority to “oversee” the flock.<sup>25</sup>

In order for there to be discipline in the church there must be some kind of “membership” in the church. Parents don’t usually discipline other people’s kids. You can’t remove from the church one who is not officially in it. Shepherds are only responsible to oversee their *own* flock not all random wandering sheep. Discipleship demands there be discipline, that is, the holding of people accountable to certain standards. This requires that a disciple submit to the discipline of the church by joining the church. You can’t fire someone who doesn’t work for you; you can’t be “thrown out of the synagogue” unless you’re a member (John 12:41), and you can’t be disciplined unless you join the church.

Discipline, in the sense of accountability to a smaller group of believers, is also an important aspect of discipleship. To agree to certain standards of study, attendance, and homework, it usually is necessary to motivate people to complete a course. In the realm of discipleship a person will usually grow in knowledge and godliness according to his willingness to be held accountable to use the means of grace. Growth to maturity is impossible without discipline.

## **Family Celebration**

All families have celebrations where people express their love, participate in certain rituals and just enjoy each other and the blessings of God. These include birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, reunions, and marriages, as well as family meals, family devotions, and family outings. These promote a sense of belonging and a bonding based on shared experience.

The New Testament church assembled regularly for worship, the celebration of Christ’s work, and fellowship. “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”<sup>26</sup> New Testament believers worshiped God according to the pattern of Christ (Luke 4:16) and Old Testament believers by keeping the Sabbath and other holy days (Acts 5:12). Gathering as a body was a means of grace to them as well as a way of elevating Christ and His work.<sup>27</sup> They collectively encouraged and built each other up when they gathered for public worship: “When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor. 14:26 NASB). Since all believers collectively comprise the temple of God,<sup>28</sup> it is reasonable to assume God is especially present in

the public worship of the saints. Matthew Henry writes: “So then let every saint praise Him, but especially the congregation of the saints; when they come together, let them join in praising God. The more the better; it is the more like heaven.”<sup>29</sup>

In public worship God is glorified and pleased (John 4:23), and saints are built up. These holy convocations are the family celebrations that bond us together, refocus our minds, and challenge us to faithfulness. Public Worship is a “means of grace” that disciples must not neglect.

### ***Time Commitment***

It takes humans longer to mature than any other creature. It takes eighteen to twenty years and a tremendous amount of effort, prayer, money and care to bring a human being to maturity. The plant analogies used to depict the Christian life underscore the slow process of discipleship. Christians are like fruit bearing trees (Matt. 7:17), mustard plants (Matt. 13:32), and crops with a hundred-fold yield (Matt. 13:8). All plants, especially trees, require lots of time in order to be productive. After sowing, cultivating, fertilizing, and many months, (sometimes many seasons in the case of fruit trees) finally there is a harvest.

It takes time to grow disciples. They require constant care by doting spiritual farmers over a long period of time to mature. Disciplers should not be discouraged by the slow progress and seemingly endless toil required in the discipling process. “In due season we shall reap if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9). We must be patient as the farmer who waits for the crop (Jas. 5:7)!

Faithful parents sign up for the long haul. Disciplers should be aware of the length of this process. Conversely, the disciple should not expect instant maturity either. Sinful habits sometimes require a lifetime to break (Eph. 4:22-24). Maturing takes time!

### ***Conclusion***

All of us who are responsible for the nurture of souls should critically examine what we are doing to produce disciples in our churches. I challenge you to use this family model as a grid and place it over your church. Do you have spiritual guardians devoted to nurturing souls? Are you providing an environment of love, respect and acceptance best suited to incubating disciples? Are people involved in true community? Is pure doctrine being taught and believed? Is discipline being practiced? Are worship celebrations being attended? Are you patient and committed for the long, hard task of discipleship? Making disciples is our Master’s commission; so let’s seriously consider how we’re doing.

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<sup>1</sup> “Make Disciples,” *WRS Journal* 8:2 (Aug. 2001), 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> John 1:35; 3:6; 1 Pt. 1:23.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:2.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Pet. 1:14; 1 John 2:1.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 4:15; Heb. 6:1.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:2.

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 6:10.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:41-42 (NIV).

<sup>9</sup> John 8:31; 13:35; 15:8.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor. 6:13; Gal. 4:19; 1 John 2:1.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:3.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Eph. 4:2-3, 29-32; Rom. 14:1, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 15:7, 14; Gal. 5:13, etc.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Col. 2:19.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Joe S. Ellis, *The Church on Purpose* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1982), p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; etc.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Cor. 6:11; 1 Thess. 2:8.

<sup>20</sup> James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p.110.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 20:29; 2 Cor. 11:13; Gal. 1:9; 1 Tim. 6:3-4; etc.

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 23:15; 2 Tim. 2:17; 2 Pet. 2:1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Prov. 22:15; Heb. 12:8.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5-7; Heb. 13:17.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 2:46 NIV.

<sup>27</sup> Heb. 10:24-25; 12:22-24.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Bible* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.), 3/339.