

DISCIPLESHIP: The Work of The Ministry

by David E. Moss

Some churches enjoy emphasizing Salvation. They are zealously evangelistic, and practically every sermon preached from the pulpit is a salvation message with an invitation to walk down the aisle.

Other churches enjoy emphasizing the Christian life. They offer a lot of Bible teaching on every conceivable aspect of living victoriously as a Christian. Their services often close with an opportunity for the believers to raise their hands in response to the particular commitment suggested by the sermon; or they have no invitation at all.

Sometimes, these two different types of churches try to justify their own approach as opposed to the other. I would like to suggest that a combination of the two is required to make a church truly effective. The Gospel is how people come into the church, but Christians must grow and mature.

This whole process of spiritual birth and growth to maturity was what Jesus Christ envisioned when He gave the Great Commission to His disciples. In Matthew 28:19 and 20, Christ did not just say evangelize. He said, teach, baptize, and teach to observe. Three steps are listed:

Step 1: Teach the truth to unsaved people. Do not simply preach at them. Do not expect people to grasp the immensity of the Gospel in five brief minutes. Faith comes from an understanding of the truth (Romans 10:17). So be diligent in exposing unsaved people to as much truth as possible and give faith the opportunity to sprout and take root (Matthew 13:3-8).

Step 2: Confirm the faith of those who say they believe. Baptism is a public testimony that a person belongs to Christ. Guiding a person to this point adds convincing evidence that his profession is genuine.

Step 3: Disciple new believers and bring them to maturity. Christ called twelve men to himself with the intent of preparing them to carry on the work after He returned to Heaven. They were to secure additional disciples to whom they could transfer everything Jesus had given them.

Each of these three steps is important to the church: evangelism, confirmation, and discipleship. None can be elevated in importance over the other.

The Problem

The real problem in the church today is not that local churches are emphasizing any one of these things over the other. The problem is that none of them are being practiced efficiently or sufficiently in most churches. Those who enjoy emphasizing evangelism often confine it to the four walls of their church sanctuary where few unsaved people are ever present. Those who enjoy emphasizing the Christian life spend tremendous energy on frivolous issues that do very little to build substance in the heart. Confirmation (as a process of initial discipleship from the moment of new birth to the testimony of baptism) is grossly neglected, leaving infant Christians in a undernourished condition for a very long time.

The Church is just having a big party. It is having a lot of fun and not getting much accomplished. In the midst of all the balloons and confetti and frivolity, the real Church is falling into disrepair.

The Solution

How should we behave ourselves in the house of God, which is the church (I Timothy 3:15)? There are a lot of answers to this question being proffered today just as there were in the first century church. God set this matter in order through His Word in the Letters to Timothy and Titus. He clearly declares the priority of an experiential knowledge of the Word and doctrine and the supreme importance of preparing each generation in the Church to produce and equip the next generation (II Timothy 2:2).

The Apostle Paul recognized that the Gospel had been committed to his trust (I Timothy 1:11). Christ counted him to be faithful, put him into the ministry (I Timothy 1:12), and ordained him a preacher, and apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles (I Timothy 2:7). But when Paul finished his personal course in the ministry, the ministry itself would not be finished. He had to prepare younger men to continue so that no momentum would be lost.

The Letters to Timothy and Titus are filled with instruction to these young men, equipping them to carry on the work. He also explains to these men the importance of adequate preparation of successors. Some, he says, desire to be teachers, but they do not understand what they are saying (I Timothy 1:7). Others desire to be leaders in the church, but they are novices (I Timothy 3:6).

The point is that anyone who desires to be skillful in anything must prepare according to the rules (II Timothy 3:5) and understand the product experientially (II Timothy 3:6) before they can function properly. In this regard, Paul's charge to Timothy was to meditate on the things God gave him and give himself wholly to them (II Timothy 4:15). He must take heed to and continue in doctrine (I Timothy 4:16). He must give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. ["Till he come to visit" (I Timothy 4:13) shows the value of accountability in training.] He was to hold fast the form of sound words (II Timothy 1:13) and study to show himself approved...rightly dividing the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15).

As a result of these disciplines, Timothy would be able to be an example of the believers in word, conversation, charity, spirit, faith, and purity (I Timothy 4:12). Titus would be able to show himself a pattern of good works: in doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity and sound speech that could not be condemned (Titus 2:7). Thus established and prepared, thoroughly furnished for the work of the ministry (II Timothy 2:21, 3:16) they would be equipped to instruct people how to behave in the church of God (I Timothy 1:3; 4:6,11; 5:7; 6:2,17; II Timothy 2:14; 4:2; Titus 1:5; 2:1,9; 3:1,8). But, they must not neglect preparing others to continue the work after them (II Timothy 2:2).

The perpetuation of the church is dependent upon the effective training of people who can carry on the work of the ministry in the next generation. Mere attendance to the basic services of the church is not sufficient. It is incumbent upon the church to continually fulfill the mandate of discipleship.

The Three Steps

Step 1: Discipleship begins with bringing people to Christ. There is a vast group of detached people wandering aimlessly in the world. They need to be informed of the truth because without the truth they remain without hope. It is crucial that members of the church be distributing the truth to the meandering crowd of the world without trickery or manipulative devices. It is not a method that brings people to freedom in Christ, it is the truth and the truth

alone.

Step 2: There is another very large group to which the church must minister - the multitude. This group includes all who have any association with the local church. They may be saved or unsaved. They may be regular attenders to all services, regular attenders to certain services, occasional attenders, or simply people who consider a particular local church to be "their church." This group will include the following:

1. The Complacent. These are people who desire an association with a local church but do not demonstrate any substantive faith. They also seem content to let things continue as they are. The Complacent need to have their curiosity aroused. This might be accomplished through stimulating teaching from the pulpit, personal exhortation, or Good Samaritan activities in which their personal human needs are met.

2. The Curious. These are people who ask questions. They realize there is a spiritual deficiency in their lives and they are curious about the solutions being offered through Jesus Christ and the Church. The Curious need to be encouraged to respond to Christ with faith and obedience.

3. The Responsive. These are people who are ready to make a commitment of obedience to Christ and enter into the smaller group of genuine disciples. The church must provide the Responsive with opportunities to be trained both in knowledge of doctrine and in specific ministry skills.

Step 3: The group that is truly serious about growth and maturity is a small group. It follows the same pattern as in Christ's own ministry on earth. He trained a small group of men to repeat in others what he invested in them. The church must provide similar training for its responsive members. It must indoctrinate them above all things in the Word of God which is so essential to effective ministry. But it should also provide these disciples with opportunities to learn through active participation in the ministry.

A Sad Commentary

In the early part of this century, there was a great movement that gave rise to Bible Colleges all over the country. These institutions served the church in a great way by providing professional training to those who would be the disciples of Christ. Yet I think we find in this a paradox. While the Bible Colleges nobly served the church, it also numbed a multitude of local churches to their personal obligations. Local churches became too busy and too much in debt to be able to disciple its own. It became comfortable in letting the Bible Colleges do it for them. And now the local church has no idea that it has any responsibility in preparing for the next generation. It is convinced that there is an unlimited supply of Pastors and Missionaries coming from some place else. When it is necessary to dispose of the ones we have, we will go to the bank and get some more.

What Will We Do?

We can either conform to the trends of the day, or do something radical like fulfill our Biblical mandate. We can all be content to be members of the multitude - in varying levels of attachment to the church - or some of us can answer the call to discipleship and get serious about preparing the next generation. We can hope our church still exists when we are all gone or we can get busy preparing someone to take our place. Or, we can count on the Rapture taking place soon and do nothing.

If you have read this article and respond with interest in being a disciple or in discipling someone else, I want to talk to you. This article is not intended simply to stimulate your thinking. I hope it motivates us to action.