

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

HANDOUT B

The Church's Role in Making Disciples

Chapter 3 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

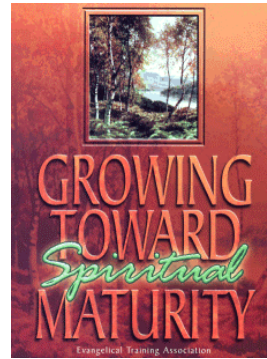
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A foundational component of Jesus' strategy to make disciples is the role of the church, the body of Christ, in that process. Many people are not aware of the church as an organism, thinking only of its profile as an organization. In this chapter we discover the rich resources found in the universal church (Rom. 12:4–5) and manifested through local assemblies devoted to making disciples of Jesus.

The Great Commission and the Church?

At first glance, one might presume the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) was directed to the eleven apostles rather than to the church. After all, the church was not even established when the challenge to “make disciples of all nations” was given. We learn in Acts 1:4, however, that just before they were given this instruction they were told not to do anything until the Holy Spirit came upon them. The initial command to make disciples was given to the eleven apostles, but the force that activated the Great Commission came to the whole church on the Day of Pentecost. As the mystery of the nature of the church is revealed by the New Testament writers, it becomes even clearer that the church is the primary recipient of the Great Commission and the organism responsible to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Terminology related to the word *disciple* that emerged between the 1960s and the 1980s camouflaged the role of the church even more. To “make disciples” or, more commonly, “to disciple” has often been used in reference to a one-on-one (or small group) relationship between an older and younger believer. Spiritual growth studies through the 1990s helped us understand the context of how the church functions as a unified body. The Bible records many examples of mentor relationships between older and younger believers, but these are never referred to as “discipling” relationships. To view the biblical command to “make disciples” only through our contemporary concept of mentoring is to miss the major role of the church in fulfilling the Great Commission. Without minimizing the role individual Christians play in the process (as we will explore in chapter 7), their role must be seen as only a part of the Commission given to the universal body.



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When Jesus gave the apostles the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20, the only command (in the original language) was to “make disciples.” The other three verbs (going, baptizing, and teaching) are participles related to the major command. Examine the text in light of the grammatical structure just mentioned, and observe how significant the command “make disciples” is to the Great Commission. Jesus challenges His eleven apostles to make disciples of *Himself*—not disciples of Peter or Matthew or John. The Commission Jesus gave the eleven men (who had spent the last three years following Him) was to make people into disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Church as the Body of Christ

When Paul wrote about the nature of the church in Ephesians, he described it as the “body of Christ” (Eph. 1:22–23). Just as Christ nurtured His disciples while He was on earth, so Christ’s body, the church, was to make His disciples after Pentecost. It is logical to presume the church, as Christ’s body, would have the authority to make disciples. The church, then, is the key to fulfilling the Great Commission and helping believers to grow toward spiritual maturity.

The Holy Spirit’s Role Through the Church

The primary success factor for the Great Commission in the early church was the Holy Spirit. Before issuing the Great Commission, Jesus spent a great deal of time teaching about the role the Holy Spirit would play in the lives of followers after He left (John 14–16). Jesus strategically timed this teaching just prior to His arrest and crucifixion to show us how important the Holy Spirit’s role would be in the growth of the church once Jesus physically departed. In one of their last meals together, Jesus commands His disciples to wait until the Holy Spirit came before doing anything. The power, presence, and gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the church enabled the small band of disciples to accomplish an even broader ministry of discipleship than Christ Himself (John 14:12). While Jesus was on earth, His impact was limited to the scope of His personal ministry and the investment He made in training others.

There were obvious reasons why Christ told His leaders to wait until the coming of the Holy Spirit before beginning the task of the Great Commission. With Jesus in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, they would have no one to guide them, empower them, and equip them for the task of making disciples. Although they had the words of Jesus carefully memorized and recorded, they were still severely limited without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit fulfilled Jesus’ promise to provide needed resources.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

The power of the Holy Spirit was given to the church to empower its members, both individually and collectively, to be a witness. Today there is a renewed emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in individual lives, but there is little focus on the Holy Spirit’s work within the church as a community. Interestingly, Luke writes: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). When the Holy Spirit first came to the church, He came to the whole church, as a community. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). Certain leaders immediately emerged with the public, supernatural gifts like teaching, preaching, and miracles. The church as a spirit-filled community played a major role in bringing disciples into the body of Christ.

After Peter's first public preaching after Pentecost, more than three thousand people became disciples (Acts 2:41). In the next paragraph (Acts 2:42–47), Luke records the Holy Spirit's ministry resulted in a daily influx of new believers. The early church ministered to one another through their devotion to at least four regular practices: teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. They had close relationships with one another and shared sacrificially with people in need. Worship took place both in the temple and in homes where they also shared meals together. As a result of the radical nature of their spiritual community life, Luke reports that they won the support of those in the geographical community around them (Acts 2:47). The Holy Spirit transformed not only individual lives but also the whole community. The church, through the supernatural resources of the Holy Spirit, was beginning its task of building disciples for Jesus.

Paul explains the connection between the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the church in the world. In Paul's prayer for a local church (Eph. 1:15–23) he asks that they may be "enlightened" to know the "incomparably great power for us who believe." He goes on to describe the nature of that power by comparing it to the source that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at the right hand of the Father, far above all of Satan's power. Paul ends his prayer with a strong statement about the nature of the church in the world (v. 22–23). Again, in Ephesians 3:10, Paul states that God's "intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." The church is God's divinely appointed means of impacting the world with the Gospel. The Holy Spirit empowers the church for this task.

The Presence of the Holy Spirit

Jesus foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit, "another Counselor," who would be with them forever. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be inside each of the disciples in a way they had never experienced before. He goes on to say, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.... On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:16–20). He promised them that when the Holy Spirit came they would experience a greater degree of intimacy with God through His presence within them. After Christ left the earth, He sent His presence in the person of the Holy Spirit to the church collectively and to each believer individually. In a real sense, the power of the Holy Spirit makes the church, as the community of disciples, the body of Christ. Since the presence of Christ Himself is found within the community of believers, the church as a community is uniquely able to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The gifts of the Holy Spirit uniquely enable the local church to be an ideal environment for disciples to grow and mature into Christ-likeness. In Ephesians 4:7–8, Paul states, "to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'" Paul takes this illustration from a military custom. When an army conquered another city, the victors took prisoners back with them in a procession. As they entered their home city, the victorious army would distribute some of the spoils from the captured city as gifts to their people. Paul uses this illustration to explain the fact that when Jesus won the battle over Satan and his demons, through the power displayed in His resurrection, He took the highest place of authority and gave "gifts" to the church. These gifts of the Holy Spirit enable every believer to play a significant role in fulfilling the task of building disciples for Jesus Christ.

Unity in the Midst of Diversity Fosters Maturity

If we picked friends who were all just like us, it might be fun for a while, but in time we would get bored. To grow and be challenged we need to be around people who are different than we are. Interestingly, Jesus chose the church to be made up of people from every tribe, culture, age group, and geographical location. It is the heterogeneous nature of the church that makes it such a rich environment to build disciples of Jesus Christ. If our goal is to make disciples of every nation, what better place to learn how to relate to people than in a local church fellowship. Within a local church setting we have the opportunity to interact and learn with people from all ages, family backgrounds, income levels, and cultures. It is within the laboratory of the local church that disciples learn to love the way Christ loved.

Developing Relationships within the Church

Growth within the church (local and worldwide) is dependent on the quality of the relationships between believers. As the church follows biblical principles for interpersonal relationships, the local body of Christ will fulfill its mandate to be a greenhouse that nurtures disciples. Some of the major principles that guide interpersonal relationships in the church also challenge believers to edify, confess faults, forbear, empathize, submit to, accept, forgive, and admonish one another.

Edify One Another

The Bible uses “edify” to signify the process of building up and strengthening one another in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16; Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11). Leaders of others in ministry must be able to build up the people they are working with because volunteers are motivated by intangible factors. Research among church volunteers indicates that the primary skill needed to motivate others in ministry is the ability to support and encourage.¹ Christians can do this through words of encouragement, notes of appreciation, fresh baked cookies, and other deeds of kindness. Simple tokens of encouragement like flowers or cards often say more than words.

Confess Faults to One Another

Christians, however committed they are to the Lord, are bound to make mistakes and hurt someone’s feelings. Whether it is forgetting an announcement, missing an appointment, or doing something foolish, we all make the occasional blunder. Even in our personal life, sin and mistakes happen. Sometimes it seems as if the older we get and the longer we walk with the Lord, the more we become aware of our shortcomings.

Yet, the sign of a growing Christian is the ability to confess sin and deal with weaknesses courageously (1 John 1:8–10). By readily acknowledging weaknesses and sin, Christian leaders and teachers remain humble and teachable. Confessing faults to one another brings healing and keeps us accountable to other members of the body of Christ (James 5:16).

Forbear with One Another

Christians, like all people, have personality quirks, weaknesses, bad habits, annoying mannerisms, and personal struggles. Within a close fellowship, like the church, these things easily become magnified by gossip and a judgmental spirit. As we bear patiently with offensive people, problems are often minimized (Eph. 4:2–3).

Empathize with One Another

Intelligence has been defined as the ability to think critically and quickly. Christians must add an interpersonal component to that definition to include the ability to see things from another person's point of view (Phil. 2:3–4). Empathizing with others means identifying with their feelings and showing compassion. Whether dealing with a sorrow or celebrating a success, people are built up when sincere members of the body come alongside to share these precious experiences with them (Gal. 6:2; Rom. 12:15).

Submit to One Another

Mutual submission is not a suggestion in Scripture; it is a command (Eph. 5:21). The supernatural strength to submit to others comes from being continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The implication in Ephesians is that when Christians submit to the Holy Spirit's control, they will put the desires and wishes of others above their own. Practical implications of submission are discussed throughout Scripture in relation to spouses and partners, children and parents, slaves and masters, and citizens and government. The cultural context must be studied for direct application; however, the principle of mutual submission should characterize all relationships.

Accept One Another

There may be a tendency in some churches to become so passionate about advancing spiritual growth that they overlook those who grow at a different pace. Paul deals with this issue in Romans 14 and 15. He challenges believers to express their faith in different ways at the different stages of their walk with God. Such diversity enriches the church as a learning environment; a laboratory of interpersonal growth where Christians of all ages, stages, race, economic background, and culture can learn to love and accept one another as unique persons. Even though Jesus taught a high standard of discipleship, His followers displayed various degrees of commitment and maturity. It was His love and acceptance that compelled them all to higher levels of commitment.

Forgive One Another

Within such a diverse and complex community like the church, there will be times when other people hurt us, either intentionally or unintentionally. We must deal with the hurt in an appropriate way and forgive the offender. Jesus makes "forgiving others" a prerequisite for being forgiven by our Heavenly Father (Matt. 6:14–15). As severe as this statement sounds, it gets to the heart of the gospel message. When we truly experience the forgiveness of Christ, we express that forgiveness to others. Christ, by example, did not always wait for the guilty person to repent (Luke 23:34; Eph. 4:32).

Some offensive behavior can simply be ignored and forgotten. Other behavior, especially when it negatively affects lives, needs to be tactfully confronted. If the guilty person asks for forgiveness, the problem resolves itself. If a person refuses to accept the responsibility for a sin, or perhaps blames someone else, the problem will usually intensify. When such a person displays a "hardened heart," we may be tempted to harbor bitter feelings. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a person who offended him, Jesus responded: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:22).

If we are to continue to grow spiritually, we must never allow bitterness to take root in our hearts. We must be willing to forgive any person, no matter how deeply we have been hurt.

Admonish One Another

Just as love without discipline produces spoiled children, so encouragement without challenge produces weak saints. There are situations in the church where a soft approach will not work.

The word “admonish” means to challenge a person’s thinking. It is usually distinguished from “teaching” because it implies something needs to be changed. In order to admonish other believers to change significant issues in their lives, wisdom must be used (Col. 3:16). To be most effective, a good relationship needs to exist between all involved. Preferably the person doing the admonishing will be older and spiritually more mature. Respect is earned through godly character and a reputation of patient forbearance. That is why the term is mostly used of leaders, pastors, and teachers rather than of younger members of the body (1 Thess. 5:12). God’s Word always provides the authoritative basis for admonishing others. Done in the right way and with a humble spirit, most people appreciate wise counsel.

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Summary

The Great Commission was given to the church as a body made up of many different types of people from all backgrounds and cultures. When the Holy Spirit was given to the church at Pentecost, His power, presence, and gifts enabled the early church to fulfill the Great Commission in ways never before imagined possible. As the church fulfills its task, the surrounding community feels the radical impact of Christian people. The health and unity of the church as a community must be continually developed if the church is to live up to its biblical mandate to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

For Further Discussion

1. In what ways is the church able to have a wider ministry of “making disciples” than even Jesus’ ministry?
2. What role does the Holy Spirit play in the lives of people in the church to enable them collectively to “make disciples” of Jesus?
3. Why are Spirit-directed interpersonal relationships so crucial to discipleship within the church?
4. In what ways should the church act as a greenhouse for growing disciples of Christ?
5. Why is the unity of the church central to the process of evangelism and discipleship?

Notes

1. Newton, Gary, “The Motivation of the Saints and the Interpersonal Competencies of Their Leaders,” *Christian Education Journal*, Spring 1990.

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