

The Church and the Making of Disciples

A Biblical Examination of the Church's Role in Developing Mature Christians

One of the central responsibilities given to the church is the making of disciples. Scripture places a clear responsibility upon every individual Christian to pursue spiritual growth, study the Word of God, pray, obey Christ, and use the gifts God has given.

At the same time, Scripture also places responsibility upon the church to teach, equip, encourage, guide, and prepare believers for the work of ministry.

Biblical discipleship therefore involves both responsibilities:

The believer must desire and pursue spiritual growth.

The church must provide teaching, equipping, guidance, and opportunities that help believers grow and serve.

The objective is not simply church attendance. The biblical objective is the development of mature Christians who eventually become capable of helping others become mature Christians.

The Great Commission Is a Command to Make Disciples

Matthew 28:19–20 (KJV)

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...”

The Great Commission does not end with conversion.

There is a progression:

Evangelize → Baptize → Teach → Develop Disciples

A person coming to Christ is the beginning of discipleship, not the completion of it.

After conversion comes the responsibility of teaching believers what Christ commanded and helping them learn to live accordingly.

This naturally raises an important question for every local church:

What happens after someone gets saved?

How does a new believer learn what salvation means?

How does that person understand baptism before being baptized?

Who teaches that believer how to pray?

How does that believer learn to study Scripture?

Where are the foundational doctrines of Christianity taught?

How does that believer learn to share the Gospel?

How are spiritual gifts identified and developed?

How does a willing Christian discover where and how to serve?

These are all elements of making disciples.

The Church Is Supposed to Equip Christians

Perhaps one of the clearest descriptions of this responsibility appears in Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:11–12 (KJV)

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

Pastors and teachers are given to the church not merely to perform ministry themselves, but also for the “perfecting of the saints.”

Believers are to be equipped “for the work of the ministry.”

The passage then explains the desired result.

Ephesians 4:13–15 (KJV)

“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man... That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro... But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things...”

The language describes spiritual progression.

Christians are not supposed to remain spiritual children.

They are supposed to grow up.

The church therefore has a role not only in gathering believers, but also in developing believers.

From Spiritual Infancy to Spiritual Maturity

Scripture repeatedly describes different stages of Christian maturity.

1 Peter 2:2 (KJV)

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.”

A new Christian naturally begins as a spiritual infant.

There is nothing wrong with being a baby Christian.

The problem occurs when spiritual infancy becomes permanent.

Hebrews describes believers who should have progressed further in their spiritual development:

Hebrews 5:12–14 (KJV)

“For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again... But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age...”

The expectation is significant.

At one point, a Christian needs to be taught.

Eventually, that Christian should become mature enough to teach others.

A healthy discipleship process might therefore be viewed as:

NEW BELIEVER → GROWING DISCIPLE → EQUIPPED SERVANT → MATURE BELIEVER → DISCIPLE-MAKER

Discipleship Is Intended to Reproduce

Paul gave Timothy a remarkably simple model for discipleship.

2 Timothy 2:2 (KJV)

“And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.”

Several generations of discipleship appear in this single verse:

Paul → Timothy → Faithful Believers → Others

The person who is taught eventually becomes capable of teaching.

The person who is disciplined eventually becomes capable of discipling.

This creates multiplication rather than dependency.

The objective is not simply to produce Christians who know more. It is to produce Christians who become spiritually mature enough to help develop other Christians.

Mature Christians Have a Role in Developing Others

Discipleship is not exclusively the responsibility of the pastor.

Titus 2 describes mature believers teaching younger believers how Christian truth applies to everyday life.

This reveals an enormous resource within every local church:

mature Christians who have spent years walking with Christ.

These believers possess biblical knowledge, experience, wisdom, and practical understanding that can be invested in Christians who are earlier in their spiritual development.

Intentional mentoring allows that experience to be passed from one generation of believers to another.

Christians Need Opportunities to Use Their Gifts

1 Peter 4:10 (KJV)

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another...”

Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 likewise describe different gifts and functions within the body of Christ.

God does not give every Christian identical abilities or responsibilities.

Some teach.

Some lead.

Some encourage.

Some serve.

Some give.

Some evangelize.

Some demonstrate extraordinary mercy and compassion.

Some possess abilities that may not become apparent until someone gives them an opportunity to serve.

This creates another important responsibility within discipleship:

helping willing Christians move from willingness to usefulness.

That may involve identifying abilities and spiritual gifts, providing training, placing less-experienced Christians beside experienced Christians, and gradually providing opportunities for greater responsibility.

Discipleship Includes Outreach

The Great Commission begins with a simple command:

“Go.”

Christian ministry cannot exist entirely inside the walls of the church.

Acts 1:8 (KJV)

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me...”

Biblical outreach can take many forms.

It can include evangelism, local missions, visiting the sick, caring for elderly people, helping struggling families, reaching people who have fallen away from church, supporting missionaries, serving the community, and teaching Christians how to confidently share the Gospel.

Outreach also provides an important environment for discipleship.

Christians can learn about evangelism in a classroom.

Eventually they must evangelize.

Christians can hear sermons about service.

Eventually they must serve.

Christians can study spiritual gifts.

Eventually those gifts must be exercised.

Discipleship moves biblical knowledge into biblical action.

The Church Is a Body, Not an Audience

1 Corinthians 12:18 (KJV)

“But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.”

The New Testament repeatedly describes the church as a body.

A healthy body does not consist of one functioning member surrounded by spectators.

Each member has a role.

This means there may be tremendous unused ministry potential sitting within any congregation.

There may be future Bible teachers.

There may be evangelists.

There may be mentors.

There may be people gifted in service, administration, encouragement, mercy, leadership, hospitality, or giving.

There may be people capable of becoming excellent disciple-makers.

Part of developing the body is creating opportunities for those gifts to be discovered, developed, and used.

Providing a Pathway for Growth

An intentional discipleship structure does not have to become a complicated church program.

The purpose is simply to provide Christians with identifiable next steps.

Such a pathway could include:

- A pre-baptism and new-believer class covering salvation, assurance, baptism, prayer, Scripture, and foundational Christian doctrine.
- Progressive Bible and doctrine classes for believers ready to move beyond the fundamentals.
- Mentoring relationships between mature Christians and developing Christians.
- Training in Bible study, prayer, evangelism, apologetics, teaching, service, and outreach.

- Opportunities to identify spiritual gifts and areas of ministry.
- Ministry apprenticeships in which developing Christians serve alongside experienced believers.
- Local outreach opportunities where biblical teaching becomes practical Christian service.
- Leadership development for Christians demonstrating maturity and appropriate gifting.
- Opportunities for mature Christians to begin discipling newer believers.

The particular structure is less important than having a structure available.

Not every church member will choose to participate.

Not every Christian will desire additional training.

But those who do desire to grow, learn, serve, and accept greater responsibility should have a clear pathway available to them.

Preaching and Discipleship Work Together

None of this diminishes the central importance of biblical preaching.

2 Timothy 4:2 (KJV)

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

Sound preaching is indispensable.

But preaching and discipleship are not competitors.

They complement one another.

Preaching teaches the Word to the congregation.

Discipleship helps individual believers understand it, apply it, practice it, and eventually teach it to someone else.

A sermon can teach Christians that they should evangelize.

Training can show them how.

A sermon can teach Christians that they should study Scripture.

Discipleship can teach them how to study it.

A sermon can call Christians to serve.

A functioning ministry structure can give them somewhere to serve.

The Biblical Objective

Paul provides an excellent summary of the objective:

Colossians 1:28 (KJV)

“Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.”

The objective is maturity in Christ.

The church should seek to develop Christians who:

Know what they believe.

Know Scripture.

Understand foundational Christian doctrine.

Know how to pray and study God's Word.

Can explain and defend their faith.

Can share the Gospel.

Recognize their spiritual gifts.

Have opportunities to use those gifts.

Serve other people.

Continue growing toward spiritual maturity.

Eventually become capable of discipling someone else.

The responsibility is shared.

The believer must be willing to grow.

The church must be willing to equip.

The result should be a continuing cycle:

EVANGELIZE → BAPTIZE → TEACH → EQUIP → SERVE → MATURE → DISCIPLE OTHERS

Perhaps the most useful question for any local church is therefore a very simple one:

If someone comes to Christ and says, “What is my next step?” is there a clear biblical pathway available to help that person grow from a new believer into a mature, equipped, serving disciple of Jesus Christ?

That is a question worth considering.