

DISCIPLE-MAKING MINISTER

by David Servant

Servant's guide to pastoral ministry focused on making disciples, arguing that the primary calling of every minister is to fulfill the Great Commission by equipping believers to follow Christ and reproduce spiritually.

52 Chapters

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Disciple-Making Minister

001 - Setting the Right Goal

To be successful in God's eyes, it is essential that a minister understands the goal that God has set before him. If he doesn't understand his goal, he has no way of gauging if he has succeeded or failed in reaching it.[1] He may think he has succeeded when he has actually failed. And that is a great tragedy. He is like a first-place runner who jubilantly sprints across the finish line of an 800-meter race, basking in his victory as he raises his hands before the shouting crowds, not realizing that he was actually competing in a 1600-meter race. Misunderstanding his goal has guaranteed his failure. Thinking he has won has assured his loss. In his case the saying is certainly true: "The first shall be last."

Most ministers have some kind of specific goal that they often refer to as their "vision." It is what they uniquely strive to accomplish, based on their specific calling and gifting. Everyone's gifting and calling is unique, whether it be to pastor a church in a certain city, evangelize a certain region, or teach certain truths. But the God-given goal to which I'm referring is general and applies to every minister. It is the big vision. It should be the driving general vision behind every unique vision. But too often, it is not. Not only do many ministers have specific visions that do not harmonize with God's general vision, some have specific visions that actually work against God's general vision. I certainly did at one time, even though I was pastoring a growing church.

So what is the general goal or vision that God has given every minister? We begin to find the answer in Matthew 28:18-20, a passage so familiar to us that we often miss what it is saying. Let's consider it verse by verse:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18).

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that His Father had granted Him supreme authority. Of course, the Father's intention was (and is) that Jesus be obeyed, as is the case any time the Father gives someone authority. But Jesus is unique in that His Father gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth, not just a limited authority, as He at times gives to others. Jesus is Lord.

This being so, any person who doesn't relate to Jesus as Lord is not relating to Him rightly. Jesus, more than anything else, is Lord. That is why He is referred to as "Lord" over 600 times in the New Testament. (He is only mentioned as Savior 15 times.) That is why Paul wrote, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Rom. 14:9, emphasis added). Jesus died and came back to life for the purpose of reigning as Lord over people.

[1] Throughout this teaching, I refer to ministers using the masculine pronoun he, purely for the sake of consistency and because the majority of vocational ministers, such as pastors, are men. I am convinced from Scripture, however, that God calls women to vocational ministry, and I know quite a few with very effective ministries. This is the topic of the chapter entitled, Women in Ministry.

002 - True Saving Faith

When modern evangelists and pastors invite the unsaved to "accept Jesus as Savior," (a phrase and concept never found in Scripture), it usually reveals a fundamental flaw in their understanding of the gospel. When the Philippian jailer, for example, asked Paul what he must do to be saved, Paul did not respond, "Accept Jesus as your Savior." Rather he said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31; emphasis added). People are saved when they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Mind you, they are not saved just because they believe a doctrine about salvation or Jesus, but when they believe in a person—the Lord Jesus Christ. That is saving faith. Too many think because they believe that Jesus' death was a sufficient sacrifice for their sins, or salvation is by faith, or a hundred other things about Jesus or salvation, that they have saving faith. But they don't. The devil believes all those things about Jesus and salvation. Saving faith consists of faith in Jesus. And who is He? He is Lord.

Obviously, if I believe that Jesus is Lord, I will act like he is Lord, submitting to Him from my heart. If I don't submit to him, I don't believe in Him. If someone says, "I believe there is a deadly poisonous snake in my boot," and then calmly puts his boot on, he obviously doesn't really believe what he says he believes. People who say they believe in Jesus but haven't repented of their sins and submitted to Him in their hearts don't really believe in Jesus. They may believe in an imaginary Jesus, but not the Lord Jesus, the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth.

All of this is to say that when a minister's understanding of the most fundamental message of Christianity is flawed, he is in trouble from the start. There is no way he can succeed by God's appraisal, as he misrepresents the most foundational message God wants the world to hear. He may be a pastor of a growing church, but he is failing miserably at fulfilling God's general vision for his ministry.

003 - The Big Vision

Let's go back to Matthew 28:18-19. After declaring His supreme lordship, Jesus then gave a commandment:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a).

Notice that Jesus used the word "therefore." He said, "Go therefore and make disciples..." That is to say, "Because of what I just said...because I have all authority...because I am Lord...people should of course obey Me...and so I am commanding you (and you should obey Me) to go and make disciples, teaching those disciples to obey all My commandments."

And that, simply put, is the general goal, God's great vision for all of our ministries: Our responsibility is to make disciples who obey all of Christ's commandments.

That is why Paul said that the grace of God had been given to him as an apostle to "bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (Rom. 1:5; emphasis added). The goal was obedience; the means to obedience was faith. People who have genuine faith in the Lord Jesus obey His commandments.

That is why Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him [Jesus] both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Peter wanted Christ's crucifiers to know that God had made Jesus Lord and Christ. They had killed the one whom God wanted them to obey! Under great conviction, they asked, "What shall we do?" and Peter responded first of all, "Repent"! That is, turn from disobedience to obedience. Make Jesus Lord. Next Peter told them to be baptized as Christ commanded. Peter was making disciples—obedient followers of Christ—and he was starting the right way with the right message.

This being so, every minister should be able to evaluate his success. All of us should ask ourselves, "Is my ministry leading people to become obedient to all of Christ's commandments?" If we are, we're succeeding. If we aren't, we're failing.

The evangelist who only persuades people to "accept Jesus," without telling them to repent of their sins, is failing. The pastor who is trying to build a big congregation by keeping everyone happy and organizing many social activities is failing. The teacher who only teaches the latest charismatic "wind of doctrine" is failing. The apostle who plants churches that consist of people who say they believe in Jesus, but who don't obey Him, is failing. The prophet who prophesies only to tell people what blessings will soon be coming their way is failing.

004 - My Failure

Some years ago, when I was pastoring a growing church, the Holy Spirit asked me a question that opened my eyes to see how far short I was falling in fulfilling God's general vision. The Holy Spirit asked me the following question as I was reading about the future judgment of the sheep and the goats described in Matthew 25:31-46: "If everyone in your church congregation died today and stood at the judgment of the sheep and the goats, how many would be sheep and how many would be goats?" Or, more specifically, "In the last year, how many of the people in your congregation have provided food for hungry brothers and sisters in Christ, water for thirsty Christians, shelter for homeless or traveling followers of Christ, clothing for naked Christians, or visited sick or imprisoned believers?" I realized that very few had done any of those things, or anything similar to those things, even though they came to church, sang songs of worship, listened to my sermons and gave money in the offerings. Thus, they were goats by Christ's criteria, and I was at least partly to blame, because I wasn't teaching them how important it was to God that we meet the pressing needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. I wasn't teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded. In fact, I realized that I was neglecting what was extremely important to God—the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves—not to mention the new commandment Jesus gave us to love one another as He loved us.

Beyond that, I eventually realized that I was actually teaching what worked against God's general goal of making disciples as I taught a modest version of the very popular "prosperity gospel" to my congregation. Although it is Jesus' will that His people not lay up treasures on earth (see Matt. 6:19-24), and that they be content with what they have even if it is only food and covering (see Heb. 13:5; 1 Tim. 6:7-8), I was teaching my wealthy American congregation that God wanted them to have even more possessions. I was teaching people not to obey Jesus in one respect (just like hundreds of thousands of other pastors around the world).[1]

Once I realized what I was doing, I repented and asked my congregation to forgive me. I started to try to make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded. I did so with fear and trepidation, suspecting that some in my congregation really didn't want to obey all of Christ's commandments, preferring a Christianity of convenience that required no sacrifice on their part. And I was right. By all indications, quite a few didn't care about suffering believers around the world. They didn't care about spreading the gospel to those who had never heard it. Rather, they primarily cared about getting more for themselves. When it came to holiness, they avoided only the most scandalous sins, sins that were condemned even by unregenerate people, and they lived lives comparable to average conservative Americans. But they really didn't love the Lord, because they didn't want to keep Jesus' commandments, the very thing He said would prove our love for Him (see John 14:21).

What I feared proved to be true—some professing Christians were really goats in sheep's clothing. When I called them to deny themselves and take up their crosses, some became angry. To them, church was primarily a social experience along with some good music, just what the world enjoys

in clubs and bars. They would tolerate some preaching as long as it affirmed their salvation and God's love for them. But they didn't want to hear about what God required of them. They didn't want anyone questioning their salvation. They were unwilling to adjust their lives to conform to God's will if it cost them anything. Sure, they were willing to part with some of their money, as long as they could be convinced that God would give them more in return, and as long as they directly benefited from what they gave, such as when their money improved their church facilities.

[1] In a later chapter I will take a closer look at what Scripture teaches on wealth and stewardship.

037 - Happy Pastors

Having pastored churches for two decades, having spoken to tens of thousands of pastors around the world, and having many pastors as personal friends, I think I can say that I know something about the demands of pastoring a modern church. Like every pastor of an institutional church, I have experienced the "dark side" of the ministry. It can be very dark at times. In fact, "brutal" might be a better word to describe it.

The expectations that most pastors encounter naturally create incredible stresses that sometimes even ruin their relationships within their own families. Pastors are discouraged for many reasons. They must be politicians, judges, employers, psychologists, activity directors, building contractors, marriage counselors, public speakers, managers, mind readers and administrators. They often find themselves in fierce competition with other pastors to gain a larger slice of the body of Christ. They have little time for personal spiritual disciplines. Many feel trapped in their vocation and are underpaid. Their congregations are their customers and their employers. Sometimes those employers and customers can make life very difficult.

By comparison, the house church pastor has it easy. First, if he leads an exemplary life of a true disciple and teaches uncompromised obedience to Jesus' commandments, few goats will have an interest in being part of his group. In fact, just meeting in houses is probably enough to keep many goats away. So he'll mostly have sheep to pastor.

Second, he can love and disciple all his sheep on a personal basis, because he only has twelve to twenty adults to oversee. He can enjoy real closeness with them, as he is like the father of a family. He can give them the time they deserve. I remember when I was an institutional pastor, I often felt alone. I couldn't get close with anyone with my congregation, lest others resent me for not including them in my close circle of friends or become jealous of those within that circle. I longed for genuine closeness with other believers, but wouldn't risk the potential price of gaining true friends.

In the close-knit family of a house church, the members naturally help keep the pastor accountable, as he is their close friend, not an actor on a stage.

The house church pastor can spend time developing leaders of future house churches, so when the time comes to multiply, leaders are ready. He doesn't have to watch his most promising future leaders take their gifts from the church to a Bible school in another place.

He may well have time to develop other ministry outside his local congregation. Perhaps he could minister in prisons, personal care homes or be involved in one-on-one evangelism to refugees or businesspeople. Depending on his experience, he could conceivably devote some of his time to planting other house churches, or mentoring younger house church pastors who have been raised up under his ministry.

He feels no pressure to be a Sunday-morning performer. He never needs to prepare a three-point sermon on a Saturday night, wondering how he can possibly satisfy so many people who are at so many different levels of spiritual growth.[1] He can delight in watching the Holy Spirit use everyone at the gatherings and encourage them to use their gifts. He can be absent from meetings and everything works well even without him.

He has no building to distract him and no employees to manage.

He has no reason to compete with other local pastors.

There is no "church board" that exists to make his life miserable and through which political infighting becomes common.

In short, he can be what he is called to be by God, and not what is imposed on him by cultural Christianity. He is not the lead actor, the president of a company, or the center of the hub. He is a disciple maker, an equipper of the saints.

[1] Many pastors never become good orators, even though they are God-called, caring servants of Christ. In fact, is it being too harsh to say that many sermons by pastors are boring, or at least boring at times? What one church-critic refers to as "the thousand-yard stare" is very common among the pew sitters. But those same pastors who are boring orators are often very good conversationalists, and people rarely become bored while they are engaged in conversation with one another. That is why the interactive teaching at house churches is usually always interesting. Time flies during such times, as contrasted with the many covert glances at wristwatches during church sermons. House church pastors don't have to worry about being boring.

005 - A Time for Self-Examination

This would be a good time for every minister reading this book to ask himself or herself the same question the Holy Spirit asked of me: "If the people I minister to died right now and stood at the judgment of the sheep and the goats, how many would be sheep and how many would be goats?" When ministers assure people of their congregations who act like goats that they are saved, they are telling them the exact opposite of what God wants them to be told. That minister is working against Christ. He is taking sides against what Jesus wants such people to be told according to what He said in Matthew 25:31-46. The entire point of what Jesus said there was to warn the goats. He doesn't want them to think they are going to heaven.

Jesus said that all men would know we are His disciples by our love for one another (see John 13:35). Surely He must have been speaking of a love that exceeds the love that non-Christians show each other, otherwise His disciples could not be distinguished from nonbelievers. The kind of love of which Jesus spoke is a self-sacrificing love, when we love each other as He loved us, laying down our lives for each other (see John 13:34; 1 John 3:16-20). John also wrote that we know we have passed out of death to life, that is, been born again, when we love each other (1 John 3:14). Do people who grumble, speak against, and hate ministers who teach Christ's commandments display the love that marks them as being born again? No, they are goats, on the road to hell.

006 - Disciples of All Nations

Before we move on, let's look once more at Matthew 28:19-20, the Great and General Commission that Jesus gave to His disciples, to see if we can glean any other truths from it.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a).

Note that Jesus wants disciples made in all the nations, or more correctly stated according to the original Greek, all the ethnic groups of the world. If Jesus commanded it, I am led to believe that it must be possible to do so. We can make disciples of Jesus in every ethnic group of the world. The task was not given just to the original eleven disciples, but to every single disciple after them, because Jesus told the eleven to teach their disciples to observe all He had commanded them. Thus, the original eleven taught their disciples to obey Christ's commandment to make disciples of all the nations, and this would then be a self-perpetuating commandment for every subsequent disciple. Every disciple of Jesus is supposed to be involved in some way in the discipling of the nations.

This explains in part why the "Great Commission" has not yet been fulfilled. Even though there are millions of professing Christians, the number of actual disciples who are committed to obey Jesus is much less. The large majority of professing Christians do not care about disciples being made in every ethnic group because they simply aren't committed to obeying Christ's commandments. When the subject is brought up, they will often use excuses such as, "That's not my ministry," and, "I just don't feel led in that direction." Many pastors make such statements, as do all goats who pick and choose which commandments of Christ are worthy to fit their agenda.

If every professing Christian truly believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, before long everyone in the world would hear the gospel. The collective commitment of Christ's disciples would make it happen. They would stop wasting all their time and money on temporal and worldly things, and use them to accomplish what their Lord commanded them to do. Yet when godly pastors announce that a missionary is going to be speaking at an upcoming church service, he can often expect that attendance will drop. Many of the goats will stay home or go elsewhere. They aren't interested in obeying the last commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sheep, on the other hand, always become excited at the prospect of being involved in making disciples of all the nations.

One last point in regard to Matthew 28:18-20: Jesus also told His disciples to baptize their disciples, and the apostles faithfully obeyed this commandment. They immediately baptized those who repented and believed in the Lord Jesus. Baptism, of course, represents a believers' identification with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. New believers have died and been raised as new creations in Christ. This truth Jesus wanted dramatized in the baptism of every new believer, imprinting upon his mind that he is now a new person with a new nature. He is one spirit with Christ, and is now empowered to obey God by Christ who lives within him. He was dead in his

sins, but now has been washed clean and made alive by the Holy Spirit. He is more than "just forgiven." Rather, he has been radically transformed. Thus, God is indicating once again that true believers are different people who act much differently than they did when they were spiritually dead. This is certainly also implied by Jesus' closing words, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:29). Would it not be reasonable to think that Christ's continual presence with people would affect their behavior?

007 - Jesus Defines Discipleship

We've established that Jesus' overriding goal for us is that we make disciples, that is, people who have repented of their sins and who are learning and obeying His commandments. Jesus further defined what a disciple is in John 8:32:

If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

True disciples, according to Jesus, are those who are abiding, or making their home, in His word. As they learn His truth from His Word, they are progressively "set free," and the later context indicates that Jesus was speaking about being set free from sin (see John 8:34-36). So once again we see that by Jesus' definition, disciples are learning and obeying His commandments.

Jesus later said,

By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8; emphasis added).

Thus, by Jesus' definition, disciples are glorifying God by bearing fruit. Those who bear no fruit are not proved to be His disciples.

Jesus more specifically defined that identifying fruit of His true disciples in Luke 14:25-33. Let's begin by reading just verse 25:

Now great multitudes were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them...

Was Jesus satisfied because great multitudes were "going along" with Him? Had he attained His goal now that He had succeeded in gaining a large congregation?

No, Jesus was not satisfied that great multitudes were hanging around Him, listening to His sermons, watching His miracles, and sometimes eating His food. Jesus is looking for people who love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. He wants people who obey His commandments. He wants disciples. Thus He said to those multitudes who were going along with Him:

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

There can be no mistake about it: Jesus laid down a requirement for a person to be His disciple. But must His disciples actually hate those people whom they would naturally love the most? That seems unlikely since we're commanded in Scripture to honor our parents and love our spouses and children.

Jesus must have been speaking in hyperbole, that is, exaggeration for emphasis. At bare minimum, however, He meant nothing less than this: If we are to be His disciples, we must love

Him supremely, much more than the people we naturally love the most. Jesus' expectation is certainly reasonable since He is God whom we should love with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Don't forget—the job of ministers is to make disciples, which means they are to produce the kind of people who love Jesus supremely, who love Him much, much more than they love even their spouses, children and parents. It would be good for every minister reading this to ask himself, "How am I succeeding at producing people like that?"

How do we know if someone loves Jesus? Jesus told us in John 14:21: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." So it would certainly be reasonable to conclude that people who love Jesus more than their spouses, children and parents are also people who keep His commandments. Disciples of Jesus obey His commandments.

008 - A Second Requirement

Jesus continued speaking to the multitudes that day who were going along with Him by saying, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple (Luke 14:27)."

This is the second requirement Jesus laid down to be His disciple. What did He mean? Are disciples required to literally carry large beams of wood with them? No, Jesus was again using hyperbole.

Most, if not all, of the people in Jesus' Jewish audience would have witnessed condemned criminals dying on crosses. The Romans crucified criminals along major thoroughfares outside the city gates to maximize crucifixion's effect as a deterrent to crime.

For this reason, I suspect that the phrase, "Carry your cross" was a common expression back in Jesus' day. Every person who was crucified had heard a Roman soldier say, "Take up your cross and follow me." Those were words the condemned dreaded, as they knew it marked the beginning of hours and days of gruesome agony. So such a phrase could have easily become a common expression that meant, "Accept the inevitable hardship that is coming your way."

I imagine fathers saying to their sons, "Son, I know you hate to dig out the latrine. It's a smelly, dirty job. But it's your responsibility once a month, so take up your cross. Go dig out the latrine." I imagine wives saying to their husbands, "My dear, I know how you hate to pay taxes to the Romans. But today our taxes are due, and the Tax Collector is coming up our road right now. So take up your cross. Go pay the man."

Taking up one's cross is synonymous with self-denial, and Jesus used it in that sense in Matthew 16:24: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." It could be paraphrased, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him put aside his own agenda, embrace the inevitable hardship that is coming as a consequence of his decision, and follow Me."

So, true disciples are willing to suffer for the sake of following Jesus. They've already counted the cost before they began, and knowing that hardship is inevitable, launched out with determination to finish the race. This interpretation is supported by what Jesus said next about counting the cost of following Him. Two illustrations made His point:

For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace.

Jesus' point could not be clearer: "If you want to be My disciple, count the cost in advance, lest you quit when the going gets rough. True disciples accept the hardship that comes as a result of following Me."

009 - A Third Requirement

Jesus listed one more requirement of discipleship to the multitudes that day:

So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all His own possessions (Luke 14:33).

Again, it would seem logical to conclude that Jesus was using hyperbole. We don't need to give up all of our possessions in the sense that we are left without shelter, clothing and food. We must, however, certainly give up all of our possessions in the sense of turning their ownership over to God, and to the degree that we are no longer serving mammon, but serving God with our mammon. The result could certainly mean giving up many unnecessary possessions and living a simple life of godly stewardship and sharing, as did the early Christians we read about in the book of Acts. Being Christ's disciple means obeying His commandments, and He commanded His followers to not lay up treasures on earth, but to lay them up in heaven.

In summary, according to Jesus, if I am to be His disciple, I must bear fruit. I must love Him supremely, much more than even my own family members. I must be willing to face the inevitable hardships that will arise as a result of my decision to follow Him. And I must do what He says with my income and possessions. (And many of His commandments have something to say in this regard, so I must not fool myself, as so many do, saying, "If the Lord told me to do something with all my possessions, I would do whatever He said.")

And these are the kinds of committed followers of Christ that we as ministers are supposed to be making! That is our God-ordained goal! We are called to be disciple-making ministers!

That is a foundational truth that many ministers around the world are completely missing. If they evaluate their ministries, as I did, they will have to conclude, as I did, that they are falling far short of God's desire and expectation. When I considered the level of commitment to Christ demonstrated by the people of my congregation, I had little doubt that there were many who could not be classified as true disciples.

Pastors, take a look at your congregation. How many of your people does Jesus consider to be His disciples according to His criteria in Luke 14:26-33? Evangelists, is the message you preach producing people who are committing themselves to obey all of Christ's commandments?

Now is the time to evaluate our ministries, before we stand before Jesus at the final evaluation. If I'm falling short of His goal, I'd rather discover it now than then. Wouldn't you?

010 - A Final Sobering Thought

Clearly, Jesus wants people to become His disciples, as revealed by His Words to the multitudes recorded in Luke 14:26-33. How important is to become His disciple? What if one chooses not to become His disciple? Jesus answered these questions at the close of His discourse in Luke 14:

Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Luke 14:34-35)

Notice that this is not an unrelated statement. It begins with the word therefore.

Salt is supposed to be salty. That is what makes it salt. If it loses its flavor, it is useless for anything and "thrown out."

What does this have to do with being a disciple? Just as salt is expected to be salty, so Jesus expects people to be His disciples. Since He is God, our only reasonable obligation is to love Him with supremely, take up our crosses and give up all our possessions. If we don't become His disciples, we reject His very reason for our existence. We are good for nothing and destined to be "thrown out." That doesn't sound like heaven, does it?

At another time, Jesus said to His disciples (see Matt. 5:1):

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men (Matt. 5:13).

These are sobering warnings indeed. First, only those who are salty (an obvious metaphor for "committed obedience") are of any use to God. The rest are "good for nothing...except to be thrown out and trampled." Second, it must be possible for one who is "salty" to become "unsalty," otherwise Jesus would not have seen any need to warn His disciples. How these truths contradict what so many teach today, saying that one can be a heaven-bound believer in Christ but not be a disciple of Christ, or that it is not possible to forfeit one's salvation status. We'll consider those erroneous ideas in more detail in later chapters.

011 - Beginning Rightly

Biblically speaking, a disciple is a sincere believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, one who is abiding in His Word and consequently being set free from sin. A disciple is one who is learning to obey all of Christ's commandments, and one who loves Jesus more than his own family, his own comfort, and his possessions, and he manifests that love by his lifestyle. Jesus' true disciples love one another and demonstrate that love in practical ways. They are bearing fruit.[1] These are the kinds of people Jesus wants.

Obviously those who are not His disciples cannot make disciples for Him. Thus we must first be certain that we ourselves are His disciples before we attempt to make any disciples for Him. Many ministers, when weighed against the biblical definition of what a disciple is, fall short. There is no hope that such ministers can make disciples, and they in fact, won't even try. They are not committed enough themselves to Jesus Christ to endure the difficulties that come with making true disciples.

From this point on, I'm going to assume that ministers who continue reading are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ themselves, fully committed to obeying His commandments. If you are not, there is no sense in your reading any further until you make the necessary commitment to become a true disciple. Don't wait any longer! Fall on your knees and repent! By His marvelous grace, God will forgive you and make you a new creation in Christ!

[1] This definition is derived from what we've already read in Matthew 28:18-20, John 8:31-32; 13:25, 15:8 and Luke 14:25-33.

012 - Redefining Discipleship

Although Jesus made it quite clear what a disciple is, many have replaced His definition with one of their own. For example, to some the word disciple is a vague term that applies to anyone who professes to be a Christian. To them, the word disciple has been stripped of all its biblical meaning.

Others consider discipleship to be an optional second step of commitment for heaven-bound believers. They believe that one may be a heaven-bound believer in Jesus but not be a disciple of Jesus! Because it is so difficult to simply ignore Jesus' demanding requirements for discipleship that are recorded in Scripture, it is taught that there are two levels of Christians—the believers, who believe in Jesus, and the disciples, who believe in and are committed to Jesus. Along these lines, it is often said that there are many believers but few disciples, but that both are going to heaven.

This doctrine effectively neutralizes Christ's commandment to make disciples, which in turn neutralizes the making of disciples. If becoming a disciple means self-denying commitment and even hardship, and if becoming a disciple is optional, the large majority of people will elect not to become disciples, especially if they think they will be welcomed into heaven as non-disciples.

So here are some very important questions that we must ask: Does Scripture teach that one can be a heaven-bound believer but not be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Is discipleship an optional step for believers? Are there two levels of Christians, the uncommitted believers and the committed disciples?

The answer to all of these questions is No. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that there are two categories of Christians, the believers and the disciples. If one reads the book of Acts, one will read repeated references to the disciples, and they are obviously not references to a higher-class of more committed believers. Everyone who believed in Jesus was a disciple.[1] In fact, "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26, emphasis added).

[1] Disciples are mentioned in Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1, 10, 19, 25, 26, 36, 38; 11:26, 29; 13:52; 14:20, 21, 22, 28; 15:10; 16:1; 18:23, 27; 19:1, 9, 30; 20:1, 30; 21:4, 16. Believers are mentioned only in Acts 5:14; 10:45 and 16:1. In Acts 14:21, for example, Luke wrote, "And after they [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples..." Thus Paul and Barnabas made disciples by preaching the gospel, and people became immediate disciples at their conversion, not at some later optional time.

013 - Jesus' Commentary

Jesus certainly didn't think that becoming a disciple was a secondary, optional step for believers. His three requirements for discipleship that we read in Luke 14 were not addressed to believers as an invitation to a higher level of commitment. Rather, His words were addressed to everyone among the multitudes. Discipleship is the first step in a relationship with God. Moreover, we read in John 8:

As He [Jesus] spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make your free" (John 8:31-32).

No one can intelligently argue against the undeniable fact that Jesus was talking to newly-professing believers about being His disciples. Jesus did not say to those newly-professing believers, "Sometime in the future you may want to consider taking the next step, a step of commitment, to become My disciples." No, Jesus spoke to those new believers as if He expected them to be disciples already, as if the words believer and disciple were synonymous terms. He told those newly-professing believers that the way they could prove they were His disciples was by abiding in His word, which would result in their being set free from sin (see 8:34-36).

Jesus knew that just people's profession of faith was no guarantee that they really did believe. He also knew that those who truly believed He was the Son of God would act like it—they would immediately become His disciples—yearning to obey and please Him. Such believers/disciples would naturally abide in His Word, making it their home. And as they discovered His will by learning His commandments, they would be progressively set free from sin.

That is why Jesus immediately challenged those new believers to test themselves. His statement, "If you are truly My disciples" indicates He believed there was a possibility that they were not true disciples, but only professing disciples. They could be fooling themselves. Only if they passed Jesus' test could they be certain they were His true disciples. (And it seems from reading the rest of the dialogue in John 8:37-59 that Jesus certainly had good reason to doubt their sincerity.)[1]

Our key scripture, Matthew 28:18-20, itself dispels the theory that disciples are a higher class of committed believers. Jesus commanded in His Great Commission that disciples be baptized. Of course, the record of the book of Acts indicates that the apostles didn't wait until new believers took a "second step of radical commitment to Christ" before they baptized them. Rather, the apostles baptized all new believers almost immediately after their conversion. They believed that all true believers were disciples.

In this regard, those who believe that disciples are the uniquely committed believers are not consistent with their own theology. Most of them baptize anyone who professes to believe in Jesus, not waiting for them to reach the committed level of "discipleship." Yet if they really believe what they preach, they should only baptize those who reach the discipleship level, which would be very few among their ranks.

Perhaps one final blow to this diabolical doctrine will suffice. If disciples are different than believers, why is it that John wrote that love for the brethren is the identifying mark of true born-again believers (see 1 John 3:14), and Jesus said that love for the brethren is the identifying mark of His true disciples (John 13:35)?

[1] This passage of Scripture also exposes the mistaken modern practice of assuring new converts of their salvation. Jesus did not assure these newly-professing converts that they were surely saved because they had prayed a short prayer to accept Him or verbalized faith in Him. Rather, He challenged them to consider if their profession was genuine. We should follow His example.

014 - The Origin of this False Doctrine

If the idea of two separate classes of Christians, the believers and the disciples, is not found in Scripture, how is such a doctrine defended? The answer is that this doctrine is solely supported by another false doctrine about salvation. That doctrine alleges that the demanding requirements for discipleship are not compatible with the fact that salvation is by grace. Based on that logic, the conclusion is drawn that the requirements for discipleship cannot be requirements for salvation. Thus, being a disciple must be an optional step of commitment for heaven-bound believers who are saved by grace.

The fatal flaw with this theory is that there are scores of scriptures that oppose it. What, for example, could be more clear than what Jesus said near the close of His Sermon on the Mount, after He had enumerated numerous commandments?

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Clearly, Jesus linked obedience with salvation, here and in many other statements. So how can we reconcile the numerous scriptures like this with the Bible's affirmation that salvation is by grace? It is quite simple. God, by His amazing grace, is temporarily offering everyone an opportunity to repent, believe, and be born again, empowered to live obediently by the Holy Spirit. So salvation is by grace. Without God's grace, no one could be saved, because all have sinned. Sinners cannot possibly merit salvation. So they need God's grace to be saved.

God's grace is revealed in so many ways in regard to our salvation. It is revealed in Jesus' dying on the cross, God's calling us through the gospel, His drawing us to Christ, His convicting us of our sin, His granting us an opportunity to repent, His regenerating us and filling us with His Holy Spirit, His breaking the power of sin over our lives, His empowering us to live in holiness, His discipline of us when we sin, and so on. None of these blessings have we earned. We are saved by grace from start to finish.

According to Scripture, however, salvation is not only "by grace," but "through faith": "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8a; emphasis added). Both components are necessary, and they are obviously not incompatible. If people are to be saved, both grace and faith are necessary. God extends His grace, and we respond by faith. Genuine faith, of course, results in obedience to God's commandments. As James wrote in the second chapter of his epistle, faith without works is dead, useless, and cannot save (see Jas. 2:14-26).[1]

The fact is, God's grace has never offered anyone a license to sin. Rather, God's grace offers people a temporary opportunity to repent and be born again. After death, there is no more opportunity to repent and be born again, and thus God's grace is no longer available. So, His saving grace must be temporary.

[1] Moreover, contrary to those who maintain that we are saved by faith even if we have no works, James says that we cannot be saved by a faith that is alone: "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." True faith is never alone; it is always accompanied by works.

015 - A Woman Whom Jesus Saved by Grace Through Faith

A perfect picture of salvation offered by grace through faith is found in the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you [that is grace, because she deserved to be condemned]; go your way; from now on sin no more" (John 8:11, emphasis added). When she deserved to die, Jesus let her go free. He sent her away, however, with a warning: From now on sin no more. This is exactly what Jesus is saying to every sinner in the world—"I'm not condemning you now. You deserve to die and be condemned forever in hell, but I'm showing you grace. My grace, however, is only temporary, so repent. Stop sinning now, before My grace ends and you find yourself standing before My judgment seat as a guilty sinner."

Let us imagine that adulterous woman repented as Jesus instructed her. If she did, she was saved by grace through faith. She was saved by grace because she could never have been saved without God's grace, being a sinner. She could never rightly say that she earned her salvation by her works. And she was saved through faith because she believed in Jesus and thus believed what He said to her, heeding His warning, and turned from her sin before it was too late. Anyone who has genuine faith in Jesus will repent, because Jesus warned that unless people repent, they will perish (see Luke 13:3). Jesus also solemnly declared that only those who do the will of the Father will enter heaven (Matt. 7:21). If one believes in Jesus, one will believe and heed His warnings.

But let us imagine that the adulterous woman didn't repent of her sin. She kept on sinning and then died and stood at Jesus' judgment seat. Imagine her saying to Jesus, "Oh Jesus! It is so good to see You! I remember how You didn't condemn me for my sin when I was brought before You on the earth. Surely You are still just as gracious. You didn't condemn me then, so surely You won't condemn me now!"

What do you think? Would Jesus welcome her into heaven? The answer is obvious. Paul warned, "Do not be deceived; neither fornicators...nor adulterers...shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

All of this is to say that Jesus' requirements for discipleship are nothing more than a requirement for genuine faith in Him, what amounts to saving faith. And everyone who has saving faith has been saved by grace through faith. There are no biblical grounds for the claim that, because salvation is by grace, Jesus' requirements for discipleship are incompatible with His requirements for salvation. Discipleship is not an optional step for heaven-bound believers; rather, discipleship is the evidence of genuine saving faith.[1]

This being so, to be successful in God's eyes, a minister should begin rightly the process of disciple-making by preaching the true gospel, calling people to an obedient faith. When ministers promote the false doctrine that discipleship is an optional step of commitment for heaven-bound believers, they are working against Christ's commandment to make disciples and are proclaiming a false grace and false gospel. Only Christ's true disciples possess saving faith and are going to

heaven, just as Jesus promised: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

[1] It is also helpful to keep in mind that the reason Paul often affirmed that salvation is by grace and not works is because he was constantly fighting the true legalists of his day. Paul was not trying to correct people who taught that holiness is essential for heaven, because he himself believed and often affirmed that fact. Rather, he wrote to correct Jews who, having no concept of God's grace in salvation, did not see any reason for Jesus to have died. Many did not believe that Gentiles could ever be saved because they had no concept of God's grace making salvation possible. Some thought that circumcision, physical lineage, or keeping the Law (which they did not do anyway) earned one's salvation, thus nullifying God's grace and the need for Christ to have died.

016 - The New False Gospel

Because of a false concept of God's grace in salvation, the modern gospel has often been stripped of essential biblical elements that are considered incompatible with a message of grace. A false gospel, however, only produces false Christians, which is why such a large percentage of modern new "converts" will not be found even attending church within a few weeks after they "accepted Christ." Moreover, many who do attend church are very often indistinguishable from the unregenerate population, possessing the same values and practicing the same sins as their conservative neighbors. This is because they don't really believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and haven't actually been born again.

One of those essential elements now removed from the modern gospel is the call to repentance. Many ministers feel that if they tell people to stop sinning (as Jesus did to the woman caught in the act of adultery), it will be tantamount to telling them that salvation is not of grace, but works. But this can't be true, because John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul all proclaimed that repentance is an absolute necessity for salvation. If preaching repentance somehow negates God's grace in salvation, then John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul all negated God's grace in salvation. They, however, understood that God's grace offers people a temporary opportunity to repent, not an opportunity to continue sinning.

For example, when John the Baptist proclaimed what Luke refers to as "the gospel," his central message was repentance (see Luke 3:1-18). Those who didn't repent would go to hell (see Matt. 3:10-12; Luke 3:17).

Jesus preached repentance from the start of His ministry (see Matt. 4:17). He warned people that unless they repented, they would perish (see Luke 13:3, 5).

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to preach in various cities, "They went out and preached that men should repent" (Mark 6:12, emphasis added).

After His resurrection, Jesus told the twelve to take the message of repentance to the whole world, because it was the key that opened the door to forgiveness:

And He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47, emphasis added).

The apostles obeyed Jesus' instructions. When Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, his convicted listeners, after realizing the truth about the Man whom they had recently crucified, asked Peter what they should do. His response was that they, first of all, should repent (see Acts 2:38).

Peter's second public sermon at Solomon's portico contained the identical message. Sins would not be wiped away without repentance:[1]

Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away (Acts 3:19a, emphasis added).

When Paul testified before King Agrippa, he declared that his gospel had always contained the message of repentance:

Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance (Acts 26:19-20; emphasis added).

In Athens, Paul warned his audience that everyone must stand in judgment before Christ, and those who have not repented will be unprepared for that great day:

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31, emphasis added).

In his farewell sermon to the Ephesian elders, Paul listed repentance along with faith as an essential part of his message:

I did not shrink from...solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20a, 21; emphasis added).

This list of scriptural proofs should be enough to convince anyone that unless the necessity of repentance is proclaimed, the true gospel has not been preached. A relationship with God begins with repentance. There is no forgiveness of sins without it.

[1] Likewise, when God revealed to Peter that Gentiles could be saved simply by believing in Jesus, Peter declared to Cornelius' household, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what it right, is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34b-35, emphasis added). Peter also declared in Acts 5:32 that God gave the Holy Spirit "to those who obey Him." All true Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6).

017 - Repentance Redefined

Even in the light of so many scriptural proofs that salvation depends on repentance, some ministers still find a way to nullify its necessity by twisting its clear meaning to make it compatible with their faulty conception of God's grace. By their new definition, repentance is no more than a change of mind about who Jesus is, and one that, amazingly, may not necessarily affect a person's behavior.

So what did the New Testament preachers expect when they called people to repent? Were they calling people to only change their minds about who Jesus is, or were they calling people to change their behavior?

Paul believed that true repentance required a change of behavior. We have already read his testimony regarding decades of ministry, as he declared before King Agrippa,

Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance (Acts 26:19-20, emphasis added).

John the Baptist also believed that repentance was more than just a change of mind about certain theological facts. When his convicted audience responded to his call for repentance by asking what they should do, he enumerated specific changes of behavior (see Luke 3:3, 10-14). He also derided the Pharisees and Sadducees for only going through the motions of repentance, and warned them of hell's fires if they didn't truly repent:

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance....the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt. 3:7-10, emphasis added).

Jesus preached the same message of repentance as John (see Matt. 3:2; 4:17). He once stated that Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching (see Luke 11:32). Anyone who has ever read the book of Jonah knows that the people of Nineveh did more than change their minds. They also changed their actions, turning from sin. Jesus called it repentance.

Biblical repentance is a willful change of behavior in response to authentic faith born in the heart. When a minister preaches the gospel without mentioning the need for a genuine change of behavior that authenticates repentance, he is actually working against Christ's desire for disciples. Moreover, he deceives his audience into believing that they can be saved without repenting, thus potentially insuring their damnation if they believe him. He is working against God and for Satan, whether he realizes it or not.

If a minister is going to make disciples as Jesus commanded, he must begin the process rightly. When he doesn't preach the true gospel that calls people to repentance and an obedient faith, he is destined to failure, even though he may be a great success in the eyes of people. He may have

a large congregation, but he is building with wood, hay and straw, and when his works go through the future fire the quality of his work will be tested. They will be consumed (see 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

018 - Jesus' Calls to Commitment

Not only did Jesus call the unsaved to turn from sin, He also called them to commit themselves to follow and obey immediately. He never offered salvation on lesser terms, as is often done today. He never invited people to "accept" Him, promising them forgiveness, and then later suggested that they might want to commit themselves to obey Him. No, Jesus demanded that the very first step be a step of whole-hearted commitment.

Sadly, Jesus' calls to costly commitment are often simply ignored by professing Christians. Or, if they are acknowledged, are explained away as being calls to a deeper relationship that are supposedly addressed, not to the unsaved, but to those who have already received God's saving grace. Yet so many of these "believers" who claim that Jesus' calls to costly commitment are addressed to them rather than the unsaved do not heed His calls as they interpret them. In their minds, they have the option not to respond in obedience, and they never do.

Let's consider one of Jesus' invitations to salvation that is often interpreted to be a call to a deeper walk, supposedly addressed to those who are already saved:

And He [Jesus] summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:34-38).

Is this an invitation to salvation addressed to unbelievers or an invitation to a more committed relationship addressed to believers? As we read honestly, the answer becomes obvious.

First, notice that the crowd Jesus was speaking to consisted of "the multitude with His disciples" (v. 34, emphasis added). Clearly then, the "multitude" did not consist of His disciples. They, in fact, were "summoned" by Him to hear what He was about to say. Jesus wanted everyone, followers and seekers, to understand the truth He was about to teach. Notice also that He then began by saying, "If anyone" (v. 34, emphasis added). His words apply to anyone and everyone.

As we continue reading, it becomes even clearer who Jesus was addressing. Specifically, His words were directed at every person who desired to (1) "come after" Him, (2) "save his life," (3) not "forfeit his soul," and (4) be among those whom He will not be ashamed of when He "comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." All four of these expressions indicate Jesus was describing people who desired to be saved. Are we to think that there is a heaven-bound person who does not want to "come after" Jesus and "save his life"? Are we to think that there are true believers who will "forfeit their souls," who are ashamed of Jesus and His words, and of whom Jesus will be ashamed when He returns? Obviously, Jesus was talking about gaining eternal salvation in this passage of Scripture.

Notice that each of the last four sentences in this five-sentence passage all begin with the word "For." Thus each sentence helps to explain and expand upon the previous sentence. No sentence within this passage should be interpreted without considering how the others illuminate it. Let's consider Jesus' words sentence by sentence with that in mind.

041 - More Differences

Institutional churches with small groups are still structured like a corporation pyramid, where everyone knows his place in the hierarchy. The people at the top may call themselves "servant leaders," but they often are more like chief executive officers who are responsible to make executive decisions. The larger the church, the more distant the pastor is from the members of his flock. If he is a true pastor and you can get him to admit the truth in an unguarded moment, he will usually tell you he was happier when he pastored a smaller flock.

Similarly, institutional churches with small groups still promote the clergy-laity division. Small group leaders are always in a subordinate class to the paid professionals. Bible study lessons are often passed down or approved by clergy, since small group leaders can't be trusted with too much authority. Small groups are not permitted to practice the Lord's Supper, or baptize. These sacred duties are reserved for the elite class with the titles and diplomas. Those who are called to vocational ministry within the body must go to a Bible school or seminary to be qualified for "real" ministry to join the elite group.

Small groups within institutional churches are sometimes nothing more than mini-church services, lasting no longer than 60 to 90 minutes, where one gifted person leads worship and another gifted person gives the approved teaching. There is little room for the Spirit to use others, distribute gifts, or develop ministers.

People are often not seriously committed to small groups in institutional churches, attending sporadically, and groups are sometimes designed to be temporary, and so the depth of community is lesser than in house churches.

Small groups in institutional churches ordinarily meet during the week so as not to crowd the weekend with another church meeting. Consequently, a midweek small group is normally time-limited to no longer than two hours for those who can attend, and prohibitive for those who have school-age children or who must travel any significant distance.

Even when institutional churches promote small group ministry, there is still a building on which to waste money. In fact, if the small group program adds people to the church, even more money ends up being wasted on building programs. Additionally, organized small groups within institutional churches often require at least one additional paid staff person. That means more money for another church program.

Perhaps worst of all, pastors of institutional churches with small groups are often extremely limited in their personal disciple making. They are so busy with their many responsibilities and find little time for one-on-one discipleship. About the closest they can get is discipling the small group leaders, but even that is often limited to a once-a-month meeting.

All of this is to say that house churches, in my opinion, are more biblical and effective in making and multiplying disciples and disciple-makers. I realize, however, that my opinion is not going to

quickly change hundreds of years of church tradition. So I urge institutional pastors to do something in the direction of moving their churches to a more biblical model of disciple-making.[1] They could consider personally discipling future leaders or initiating small group ministry. They could hold an "early-church Sunday" when the church building would be closed and everyone would share a meal in homes and attempt to meet like Christians did for the first three centuries. Pastors who have small groups within their churches could consider releasing some of those small groups to form house churches and see what happens. If small groups are healthy and lead by God-called pastors/elders/overseers, they should be able to operate on their own. They don't need the mother church any more than any non-affiliated young church needs that mother church. Why not set them free?[2] The member's money that is going to the mother church could support the pastor of the house church.

Does my endorsement of house churches mean that there is nothing good to say about institutional churches? Absolutely not. To the degree that disciples who obey Christ are being made in institutional churches, they are to be commended. Their practices and structure, however, can sometimes be more of hindrance than a help to reaching the goal Christ has set before us, and they are often pastor killers.

[1] One of my favorite definitions of the word insanity is this: Doing the same thing repeatedly and hoping for different results. Pastors can teach for years about every member's responsibility to be involved in disciple-making, but unless they do something to change formats or structures, people will continue to come to church to sit, listen and go home. Pastor, if you continue to do what has not changed people in the past, it will not change people in the future. Change what you are doing!

[2] Of course, the primary reason that many pastors are adverse to this idea is because they are actually building their own kingdoms, not God's kingdom.

019 - Sentence #1

If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me (Mark 8:34).

Again, note that Jesus' words were addressed to anyone who wished to come after Him, anyone who wanted to become His follower. This is the only relationship Jesus initially offers—to be His follower.

Many desire to be His friend without being His follower, but such an option does not exist. Jesus didn't consider anyone His friends unless they obeyed Him. He once said, "You are My friends, if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

Many would like to be His brother without being His follower, but, again, Jesus didn't extend that option. He considered no one His brother unless he was obedient: "Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother" (Matt. 12:50, emphasis added).

Many wish to join Jesus in heaven without being His follower, but Jesus conveyed the impossibility of such a thing. Only those who obey are heaven-bound: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

In the sentence under consideration, Jesus informed those who wanted to follow Him that they couldn't follow Him unless they denied themselves. They must be willing to put their desires aside, making them subordinate to His will. Self-denial and submission is the essence of following Jesus. That is what it means to "take up your cross."

020 - Sentence #2

Jesus' second sentence makes the meaning of His first sentence even more clear:

For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it (Mark 8:35).

Again, notice this sentence begins with "For," relating it with the first sentence, adding clarification. Here Jesus contrasts two people, the same two people who were implied in the first sentence—the one who would deny himself and take up his cross to follow Him and the one who would not. Now they are contrasted as one who would lose his life for Christ and the gospel's sake and one who would not. If we look for the relationship between the two, we must conclude that the one in the first sentence who would not deny himself corresponds to the one in the second sentence who wishes to save his life but will lose it. And the one in the first sentence who was willing to deny himself corresponds to the one in the second sentences who loses his life but ultimately saves it.

Jesus was not speaking about one losing or saving his physical life. Later sentences in this passage indicate that Jesus had eternal losses and gains in mind. A similar expression by Jesus recorded in John 12:25 says, "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal" (emphasis added).

The person in the first sentence who would not deny himself was the same person in the second sentence who wished to save his life. Thus we can reasonably conclude that "saving one's life" means "saving one's own agenda for his life." This becomes even clearer when we consider the contrasted man who "loses his life for Christ and the gospel's sake." He is the one who denies himself, takes up his cross, and gives up his own agenda, now living for the purpose of furthering Christ's agenda and the spread of the gospel. He is the one who will ultimately "save his life." The person who seeks to please Christ rather than himself will ultimately find himself happy in heaven, while the one who continues to please himself will ultimately find himself miserable in hell, there losing all freedom to follow his own agenda.

021 - Sentences #3 & 4

Now the third and fourth sentences:

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mark 8:36-37).

In these the person is highlighted who will not deny himself. He is also the one who wishes to save his life but ultimately loses it. Now he is spoken of as one who pursues what the world has to offer and who ultimately "forfeits his soul." Jesus exposes the folly of such a person by comparing the worth of the whole world with that of one's soul. Of course, there is no comparison. A person might theoretically acquire all the world has to offer, but, if the ultimate consequence of his life is that he spends eternity in hell, he has made the gravest of errors.

From these third and fourth sentences we also gain insight into what pulls people away from denying themselves to become Christ's followers. It is their desire for self-gratification, offered by the world. Motivated by love of self, those who refuse to follow Christ seek sinful pleasures, which Christ's true followers shun out of love and obedience to Him. Those who are trying to gain all that the world has to offer pursue wealth, power and prestige, while Christ's true followers seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Any wealth, power or prestige that is gained by them is considered a stewardship from God to be used unselfishly for His glory.

022 - Sentence #5

Finally, we arrive at the fifth sentence in the passage under consideration. Notice again how it is joined to the others by the beginning word, for:

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

This again is the person who would not deny himself, but who wished to follow his own agenda, pursuing what the world had to offer, and who thus ultimately lost his life and forfeited his soul. Now he is characterized as one who is ashamed of Christ and His words. His shame, of course, stems from his unbelief. If he had truly believed that Jesus was God's Son, he certainly would not have been ashamed of Him or His words. But he is a member of an "adulterous and sinful generation," and Jesus will be ashamed of him when He returns. Clearly, Jesus was not describing a saved person.

What is the conclusion to all of this? The entire passage cannot rightfully be considered to be a call to a more committed life addressed to those who are already on the way to heaven. It is obviously a revealing of the way of salvation by means of comparing those who are truly saved and those who are unsaved. The truly saved believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thus deny themselves for Him, while the unsaved demonstrate no such obedient faith.

023 - Another Call to Commitment

There are many we could consider, but let us look at one other call to commitment by the Lord Jesus that is nothing less than a call to salvation:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

Evangelists often use this passage of Scripture in their evangelistic invitations, and rightly so. These words are clearly an invitation to salvation. Here Jesus is offering rest to those who are "weary and heavy-laden." He is not offering physical rest for those who are physically burdened, but rest for their souls, as He says. Unsaved people are weighted down with guilt, fear and sin, and when they become weary of it, they then become good candidates for salvation.

If such people want to receive the rest that Jesus is offering, they must do two things according to Him. They must (1) come to Him and (2), they must take His yoke upon them.

False grace teachers often twist the obvious meaning of the expression "taking Jesus' yoke." Some actually claim that Jesus was speaking of a yoke that must be around His own neck, which is why He called it "My yoke." And Jesus must have been speaking of a double-yoke they say, one half of which is around His neck and the other half of which is empty, waiting for us to take on our necks. We should understand, however, that Jesus is promising to do all the pulling of the plow because He said that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Thus our only job, according to such teachers, is to make sure we stay yoked to Jesus by faith, allowing Him to do all the work for our salvation, while we just enjoy the benefits offered through His grace! That interpretation, obviously, is quite forced.

No, when Jesus said that weary people should take His yoke, He meant that they should submit to Him, making Him their master, allowing Him to direct their lives. That is why Jesus said we should take His yoke and then learn of Him. Unsaved people are like wild oxen, going their own way and ruling their own lives. When they take Jesus' yoke, they give up control to Him. And the reason Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden is light is because He empowers us by His indwelling Spirit to obey Him.

Thus we see again that Jesus called people to salvation, in this case symbolized as a rest for the weary, by calling people to submit to Him and make Him their Lord.

040 - A Modern Trend

Interestingly, more and more institutional churches are developing small group structures within their institutional models, recognizing their value in discipleship. Some churches go even further, basing their core structure on small groups, considering them to be the most important aspect of their ministry. Larger "celebratory meetings" are secondary in importance to the small groups (at least in theory).

These are steps in the right direction, and God blesses such steps, as His blessing upon us is proportionate to the degree that we line up with His will. Indeed, "cell churches" are better structured than standard institutional churches to facilitate disciple making. They stand halfway between the institutional church model and the house church model, combining elements of both.

How do modern institutional churches with small groups compare with ancient and modern house churches? There are some differences.

For example, small groups within institutional churches unfortunately sometimes serve to promote much that is wrong within institutional churches, especially when the real motive for starting small group ministry is to build the senior pastor's church kingdom. He consequently uses people for his own ends, and small groups fit that plan nicely. When this occurs, small group leaders are selected for their tested loyalty to the mother church, and they can't be too gifted or charismatic, lest the devil fill their heads with ideas that they can make it on their own. This kind of policy hinders the effectiveness of small groups and, just like in any other institutional church, drives off the truly called and aspiring leaders to Bible schools and seminaries, robbing the church of true gifts, and taking such people to a place where they will be lecture-taught rather than on-the-job disciplined.

Small groups in institutional churches often evolve into little more than fellowship groups. Disciple-making really doesn't occur. Since people are supposedly being spiritually fed on Sunday mornings, small groups sometimes focus on other things besides God's Word, not wanting a repeat of Sunday mornings.

Small groups in institutional churches are often organized by a staff member of the church, rather than birthed by the Spirit. They become one more program among many other church programs. People are put together based on ages, social status, background, interests, marital status or geographical location. Goats are often mixed with sheep. All of this fleshly organization does not help believers learn to love each other in spite of their differences. Remember that many of the early churches were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. They regularly shared meals together, something forbidden by Jewish tradition. What a learning experience their meetings must have been! What opportunities to walk in love! What testimonies of the power of the gospel! So why do we think we must divide everyone into homogeneous groups to insure success of small groups?

Institutional churches with small groups still have the Sunday morning performance, where spectators watch the pros perform. Small groups are never permitted to meet when there are

"real" church services, indicating to all that it is really the institutional services that are most important. Because of that message, many, if not the majority, of Sunday morning attendees will not get involved with a small group even if encouraged to do so, seeing them as optional. They are satisfied that they are attending the most important weekly service. So the small group concept may be promoted as being somewhat significant, but not nearly as significant as the Sunday institutional service. The best opportunity for real fellowship, discipleship and spiritual growth is effectively downplayed. The wrong message is sent. The institutional service is still king.

024 - In Summary

All of this is to say that a truly successful minister is one who obeys Jesus' commandment to make disciples, and who knows that repentance, commitment and discipleship are not options for heaven-bound believers. Rather, they are the only authentic expression of saving faith. Therefore, the successful minister preaches a biblical gospel to the unsaved. He calls the unsaved to repent and follow Jesus, and he does not assure the uncommitted of their salvation.

025 - Continuing Properly

For many years and in many ways, I unknowingly followed practices that worked against the goal that God wanted me to pursue, the goal of making disciples. But gradually, the Holy Spirit graciously opened my eyes to my errors. One thing I've learned is this: I should question everything I've been taught and believed in light of God's Word. Our traditions, more than anything else, blind us to what God has said. Worse, we are very proud of our traditions, certain that we stand among an elite group who has a greater grasp of truth than other Christians. As one teacher sarcastically said, "There are 32,000 denominations in the world today. Aren't you fortunate to be a member of the one that is right?"

As a result of our pride, God resists us, because He resists the proud. If we want to make any progress and be fully ready to stand before Jesus, we must humble ourselves. To those, God gives grace.

026 - The Role of the Pastor Considered

The minister's goal of making disciples should shape everything he does in ministry. He should continually be asking himself, "How does what I'm doing contribute to the process of making disciples who will obey all of Jesus' commandments?" That simple test question, if asked honestly, would eliminate much that is done under the banner of Christian activity.

Let us consider the ministry of the pastor/elder/overseer,[1] a person whose ministry assignment focuses him on a specific local church. If that person is going to make disciples who obey all of Jesus' commandments, what should be one of his primary responsibilities? Teaching naturally comes to mind. Jesus said that disciples are made by the means of teaching (see Matt. 28:19-20). A requirement for one to be an elder/pastor/overseer is that he be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Those who "work hard at preaching and teaching" should "be considered worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17).

Therefore, a pastor should evaluate every sermon by asking himself this question, "How does this sermon help accomplish the task of making disciples?"

Is a pastor's teaching responsibility fulfilled, however, solely by means of his Sunday or midweek sermons? If he thinks so, he overlooks the fact that Scripture indicates his teaching responsibility is primarily fulfilled by the life he lives and the example he sets. The teaching example of his daily life is simply supplemented by his public teaching ministry. That is why the requirements for elders/pastors/overseers have much more to do with a person's character and lifestyle than his verbal communication skills. Of fifteen requirements listed for overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, fourteen are related to character and only one to teaching ability. Of the eighteen requirements listed for elders in Titus 1:5-9, seventeen are related to character and only one to teaching ability. Paul first reminded Timothy, "In speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:12; emphasis added). He then said, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13). Thus the example of Timothy's character was mentioned before his public teaching ministry, underscoring its greater importance.

Peter similarly wrote:

I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-3; emphasis added).

Who inspires us to deny ourselves and obey Christ? Is it those whose sermons we admire or those whose lives we admire? Uncommitted, soft-style pastors inspire no one to take up their cross. If such pastors do preach an occasional message of commitment to Christ, they must preach in vague generalities, otherwise their listeners would question their sincerity. Most of the

great Christian leaders of the past are not remembered for their sermons, but for their sacrifices. Their example inspires us long after they are gone.

If a pastor is not setting an example of obedience as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, he is wasting his time delivering any sermons. Pastor, your example speaks ten times louder than your sermons. Are you inspiring people to deny themselves and follow Christ by denying yourself and following Christ?

But how can a pastor, by means of the example of his lifestyle, teach people who primarily know him as a Sunday-morning orator? The closest they actually get to seeing him live his life is a five-second handshake as they dutifully exit the church building. Perhaps there is something not quite right about the modern pastoral model.

[1] It seems quite clear that a pastor (the Greek noun is *poimain*, meaning shepherd, found only once in the New Testament) is equivalent to an elder (the Greek noun *presbuteros*, found numerous times in the New Testament), and is also equivalent to an overseer (the Greek noun *episkopos*, translated bishop in the KJV). Paul, for example, instructed the Ephesian elders (*presbuteros*), whom he said the Holy Spirit had made overseers (*episkopos*), to shepherd (the Greek verb *poimaino*) the flock of God (see Acts 20:28). He also used the terms elders (*presbuteros*) and overseers (*episkopos*) synonymously in Titus 1:5-7. Peter, too, exhorted the elders (*presbuteros*) to shepherd (*poimaino*) the flock (see 1 Pet. 5:1-2). The idea that a bishop (the KJV translation of *episkopos*) is a higher office than pastor or elder and is one who oversees numerous churches is a human invention.

027 - The Weekly Sunday Morning Sermon

A pastor makes another wrong assumption if he thinks that his teaching responsibility is primarily one of delivering weekly public lectures. Jesus' teaching ministry consisted not only of public sermons (and for the most part, it seems they were fairly short), but also of private conversations that were initiated by His inquisitive disciples. Moreover, such conversations were not limited to one half-hour of one day of the week at a church building, but occurred along seashores, in homes, and walking along dusty roads, as Jesus lived His life in full view of His disciples. That same teaching model was followed by the apostles. After Pentecost, the twelve taught "in the temple and from house to house" (Acts 5:42, emphasis added). They had daily interaction with the community of believers. Paul also taught "publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20; emphasis added).

At this point, if you are a pastor, you may be comparing your teaching ministry to that of Jesus and the first apostles. Perhaps you are even beginning to wonder if what you have been doing is what God intends for you to do, or are you just doing more of what hundreds of years of church traditions have taught you to do. If you are wondering, that is good. That is very good. That is the first step in the right direction.

Maybe you've thought even further. Perhaps you said to yourself, "Where could I ever find the time that such a ministry would require, teaching people from house to house, or involving them in my daily life so that I primarily influence them by my example?" Now that is a wonderful question, because it could lead you to keep wondering if there is something even more wrong with the modern concept of the pastor's role.

Perhaps you even thought to yourself, "I'm not sure I would want to live my life so closely with people in my church. I was taught in Bible school that a pastor should never get too close to his congregation. He must keep some distance in order to maintain their professional respect. He can't be close friends with them."

Such a thought reveals that something is indeed very wrong with the way things are so often done in the modern church. Jesus was so close with the twelve that one of them felt quite comfortable leaning his head on His breast at a common meal (see John 13:23-25). They literally lived together for several years. So much for keeping a professional distance from one's disciples in order to successfully minister to them!

028 - A Comparison of Methods, Ancient and Modern

If the goal is to obey Jesus and make disciples, wouldn't we be wise to follow His methods for making disciples? They worked quite well for Him. They also worked quite well for the apostles who followed Him.

And how well are modern methods working to make disciples who obey all of Christ's commandments? When studies of American Christians, for example, repeatedly show that there is virtually no difference in the lifestyles of most professing Christians when compared to non-Christians, maybe its time to ask some questions and re-examine Scripture.

Here is great question to ask ourselves: How did the early church succeed so well at making disciples without any church buildings, professionally-trained clergy, Bible schools and seminaries, hymnals and overhead projectors, wireless microphones and tape duplicators, Sunday school curriculums and youth ministries, worship teams and choirs, computers and copy machines, Christian radio and TV stations, hundreds of thousands of Christian book titles and even personally-owned Bibles? They didn't need any of those things to make disciples, and neither did Jesus. And because none of those things were essential then, none are essential now. They could be helpful, but none are essential. In fact, many of those things can and actually do hinder us from making disciples. Let me give you two examples.

Let's first consider the modern essential of having only Bible school- or seminary-trained pastors lead churches. Such was an unheard of concept to Paul. In some cities, after he planted churches, he departed for a few weeks or months, and then returned to appoint elders to oversee them (see, for example, Acts 13:14-14:23). That means those churches, absent from Paul's presence, had no formal eldership for some weeks or months, and that most elders were fairly young believers when they were appointed. They had nothing close to a two- or three-year formal education that prepared them for their job.

Thus, the Bible teaches that pastors/elders/overseers do not need two or three years of formal education to be effective in their ministry. No one can intelligently argue against that fact. Yet the modern requirement continually sends a message to every believer: "If you want to be a leader in the church, you need years of formal education."^[1] This slows the process of creating leaders, thus slowing the making of disciples, thus slowing the expansion of the church. I wonder how well the American companies Avon and Amway would have saturated their targeted markets if they required every salesperson to move his or her family to another city to receive three years of formal training before he or she could be released to sell soap or perfume?

"But pastoring is such a difficult and complex task!" some say. "The Bible says we shouldn't put a new convert in the position of an overseer" (see 1 Tim. 3:6).

First, it comes down to the definition of a new convert, and clearly Paul's concept was different than ours, because he assigned people to the office of elder/pastor/overseer who had only been believers for a few months.

Second, one reason modern pastoring is so difficult and complex is because our entire system of church structure and ministry is so far removed from the biblical model. We've made it so complex that indeed, only a few super-human people can survive its demands!

"But God forbid that a church might be overseen by someone without a Bible school or seminary education!" others say. "That untrained overseer might lead his flock into false teaching!"

That apparently wasn't Paul's concern. The fact is that today we have Bible-school and seminary-trained clergy who don't believe in the virgin birth, who approve of homosexuality, who teach that God wants everyone to drive a luxury automobile, who claim that God predestines some people to be damned, or who say without flinching that one can gain heaven without obedience to Christ. The modern Bible school and seminary have often served to further false doctrine, and the professional clergy have served to further it more. Church "commoners" are afraid to challenge them, because the professionals have been to seminary and can pull out more "proof texts." Moreover, those clergy have defined and divided their churches from the rest of the body of Christ by their peculiar doctrines, to the point of even advertising those differences by the very names they place on signs in front of their church buildings, sending a message to the world: "We are not like those other Christians." To add further injury, they label anyone who disagrees with their unchallengeable and divisive doctrines as "divisive." The Inquisition is still very much alive and well, led by men with diplomas. Is this the example Jesus wants set by those who are supposed to be making disciples who are known to the world by their love for one another?

Christians now choose churches based upon particular doctrines, and having the right theology has become the most important thing rather than having the right lifestyle, all because a biblical model has been abandoned.

[1] The modern emphasis on professionally-trained clergy is in many ways a symptom of a larger disease, that of equating the gaining of knowledge with spiritual growth. We think that the person who knows more is more spiritually mature, whereas he may be less so, puffed up with pride from all he has learned. Paul did write, "knowledge makes arrogant" (1 Cor. 8:1). And surely the person who listens to daily boring lectures for two or three years is prepared to give weekly boring lectures!

029 - A Biblical Alternative

Am I advocating taking three-month old believers and giving them oversight over churches (the very thing that Paul did)? Yes, but only if those believers meet the biblical requirements for elders/overseers, and only if they are given oversight of churches that follow a biblical model. That is, those churches must first of all be newly-planted gatherings that are submitted to a mature founding minister, such as an apostle, who can provide some oversight.[1] That way, newly-appointed elders are not entirely on their own.

Second, the congregations must be small enough to meet in homes, as did the early churches.[2] That makes churches much more manageable. That is probably why one of the requirements for elders/overseers is that they successfully manage their own households (see 1 Tim. 3:4-5). Managing a small "household of faith" is not much more challenging than managing a family.

Third, the congregation must consist of people who have responded in repentance to a biblical gospel, and who are thus genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. That eliminates all of the challenges that arise from trying to pastor sheep who are actually goats.

And fourth, the pastors/elders/overseers must follow their biblical role rather than a cultural role. That is, they must not hold a central, all-important, spotlight position as they do in most modern churches.[3] Rather, they must be single parts of the entire body, humble servants who teach by example and precept, and whose goal is to make disciples, not by being Sunday-morning orators, but by following Jesus' methods.

When that pattern is followed, then some three-month-old believers can oversee churches.

[1] In Paul's first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus he mentions leaving them behind to appoint elders/overseers in the churches. So Timothy and Titus would have provided oversight to those elders/overseers for some time. They would have probably periodically met with the elders/overseers to disciple them, as Paul wrote, "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

[2] See Acts 2:2, 46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2; 2 John 1:10.

[3] It is notable that Paul's letters to the churches are addressed to everyone in the various churches, and not to the elders or overseers. In only two of his letters to the churches does Paul even mention elders/pastors/overseers. In one instance they are included in the salutation, added as if he didn't want them to think that they were excluded recipients (see Phil. 1:1). In another instance Paul mentions pastors among a list of ministers who equip the saints (see Eph. 4:11-12). It is also especially notable how Paul makes no mention of the role of elders as he gives certain instructions that we would think would involve elders, such as administering the Lord's Supper, and the resolution of conflicts between Christians. All of this points to the fact that elders/pastors

did not hold the central, all-important role that they hold in most modern churches.

030 - Church Buildings

What about church buildings? They are another modern "essential" that the early church did quite well without. Do they help in the process of disciple-making?

When I was a pastor, I often felt more like a realtor, banker, general contractor, and a professional fundraiser. I've dreamed of buildings, searched for buildings, remodeled old buildings, rented buildings, built new buildings and repaired them when God sent rain through their cracks. Buildings consume lots of time and energy. The reason I did so much that revolved around buildings is because I was certain, like most pastors, that there was no way to succeed without a building, a place for the church to gather.

Buildings also consume money, lots of it. (In the United States, some congregations spend tens of millions of dollars on their church buildings.) After my dreams of having buildings were fulfilled, I often dreamed of the day when the mortgages on my buildings would be paid off, so we could use all that money for ministry. It once occurred to me, as I was teaching my congregation about good stewardship and getting out of debt, that I had put the whole of us in debt together! (I was certainly teaching by example.)

Most church buildings are used for a couple of hours once or twice a week. What other organization in the entire world builds buildings that will be used so little? (Answer: only cults and false religions.)

That money-sucking hole causes a lot of problems. A pastor with a building always needs a flow of money, and that affects what he does. He is tempted to cater to the wealthy (who often give without any sacrifice), compromise any teaching that might offend some, and twist Scripture to make it serve his end. His sermons gravitate to subjects that don't hinder the money flow and encourage its increase. Because of that, Christians sometimes begin to think that the most important aspects of being believers are (1) paying tithes (which, incidentally, Jesus said is a minor commandment) and (2) attending church (where the tithes are collected each Sunday). This is hardly the picture of disciple making. Yet many pastors dream of having congregations where everyone would just do those two things. If a pastor had a congregation where just half of the people would do those two things, he could write books and sell his secrets to millions of other pastors!

The facts reveal this: There is no record of any congregation buying or constructing a building in the book of Acts. For the most part, believers met regularly in homes.[1] There were never any collections for building funds. There are no instructions in the epistles for church building construction. Additionally, no one thought of building a church building until Christianity was 300 years old, when the church married the world under Constantine's edict. Three-hundred years! Think of how long that is! And the church flourished and multiplied exponentially, even during times of intense persecution, all without buildings. Such phenomena have been repeated many times in the centuries that followed. It has happened in China rather recently. There are probably

more than a million house churches in China.

[1] See Acts 2:2, 46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40: 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2; 2 John 1:10.

031 - Eleven O'Clock Sunday is the Most Segregated Hour

Modern church facilities that copy the American model are expected to have, at a minimum, enough divided space to provide separate rooms for separate ministries to all age groups. In the early church, however, special segregated ministries for men, women, and all age groups of children were unheard of. The church was unified in every sense, not fragmented in every sense. The family unit was kept together, and parental spiritual responsibility was reinforced by church structure, rather than eroded by it as it has under modern church structure.

Does a church building contribute to the making of disciples or hinder it? Historically, disciple making throughout the centuries has succeeded better without them, and for many good reasons.

Meeting in houses, as did the early church for the first three centuries, where a joy-filled meal, teachings, songs, and spiritual gifts were shared for probably three to five hours, provided an environment for genuine spiritual growth for believers. Members of Christ's body felt like participators, as they sat facing each other, rather than how modern church attendees feel—like spectators in a theater, seated to look at the backs of each other's heads while trying not to miss the show on the stage. The casual atmosphere of a common meal led to transparency, authentic caring relationships and true fellowship, of no comparison to modern "fellowship," which too often is little more than a shallow shaking of hands with complete strangers in the next pew when the pastor gives the cue.

Teachings were more like question and answer sessions and open discussions among equals, rather than lectures given by those who wore odd clothing, spoke in theatrical voices, and stood high above the polite (and often bored) audience. Pastors didn't "prepare a weekly sermon." Anyone (certainly including the elders/pastors/overseers) might receive a teaching that the Holy Spirit gave.

When a house became cramped, the elder(s) wouldn't think of obtaining a bigger building. Rather, everyone knew that they had to split into two house meetings, and it was just a matter of finding the mind of the Spirit regarding where the new meeting should be held and who should provide the oversight. Fortunately, they didn't have to collect resumes' of strangers and church-growth theorists in order to scrutinize their philosophical or doctrinal slant; there were already aspiring overseers right among them, who had on-the-job training and already knew the members of their future little flock. That new house church had the opportunity to reach out evangelistically in a new area, and demonstrate to unbelievers what Christians were—people who loved one another. They could invite unbelievers to their meetings as easy as inviting them over for a meal.

032 - The Blessed Pastor

No house church pastor/elder/overseer suffered ministerial "burnout" because of being overwhelmed with pastoral responsibilities, something that is widespread in the modern church. (One study reported that 1,800 pastors are leaving the ministry per month in the U.S.) He had only a small flock to look after, and if that flock supplied his financial needs so that the ministry was his vocation, he actually had time to pray, meditate, preach the gospel to unbelievers, assist the poor, visit and pray for the sick, and spend quality time equipping new disciples to do all those things right along with him. Church administration was simple.

He worked in unison with the other elders/pastors/overseers in his region. There was no striving to have "the biggest church in town" or compete with his fellow pastors to have the "best youth ministry" or the "most exciting kids' church program." People didn't go to church meetings to judge how good the worship team performed or how entertaining the pastor was. They had been born again and loved Jesus and His people. They loved to eat together and share whatever gifts God had given them. Their goal was to obey Jesus and be ready to stand at His judgment seat.

To be sure, there were problems in house churches, and those are addressed in the epistles. But so many of the problems that inevitably plague modern churches and hinder disciple making were unheard of in the early church, simply because their model of the local church was so different than what evolved after the third century and since the dark ages. Again, allow this fact to sink in: there were no church buildings until the beginning of the fourth century. If you had lived during the first three centuries, how would your ministry have been different than it is now?

In summary, the more closely we follow biblical patterns, the more effective we will be in accomplishing God's goal of making disciples. The greatest hindrances to disciple-making in churches today stem from unbiblical structures and practices.

033 - House Churches

When people first hear of house churches, they often mistakenly imagine that the only difference between house churches and institutional churches is their size and their relative abilities to provide "ministry." People sometimes conclude that the house church cannot offer the quality of ministry provided by churches with buildings. But if one defines "ministry" as that which contributes to the making of disciples, helping them become like Christ and equipping them for service, then institutional churches have no advantage, and as I pointed out in the previous chapter, they may well be disadvantaged. Certainly house churches cannot provide the quantity of multi-faceted activities of institutional churches, but they can excel at providing true ministry.

Some people reject house churches as being true churches, simply because they lack an actual church building. Had those folks lived at any time during the first three hundred years of the church, they would have rejected every single church in the world as being a real church. The fact is that Jesus declared, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). Jesus said nothing about where believers must gather. And even if there are only two believers, He promised to be present if they gather in His name. What Christ's disciples often do in restaurants, sharing a meal and exchanging truth, teaching and admonishing one another, is actually closer to the New Testament model of church gatherings than what often happens in many church buildings on Sunday mornings.

In the previous chapter, I enumerated some of the advantages that house churches have over institutional churches. I'd like to begin this chapter enumerating a few more reasons why the house church model is a very valid biblical alternative that can be quite effective in accomplishing the goal of making disciples. First, however, let me state at the outset that my purpose is not to attack institutional churches or their pastors. There are multitudes of godly and sincere pastors of institutional churches who are doing everything they can within their structures to please the Lord. I minister to thousands of institutional pastors every year, and I love and appreciate them very much. They are among the finest people in the world. And it is because I know how incredibly difficult their jobs are that I want to present an alternative that will help them suffer fewer casualties and be more effective and happy at the same time. The house church model is one that is biblical and that potentially lends itself to the effective making of disciples and expansion of God's kingdom. I have little doubt that the large majority of institutional pastors would be much happier, more effective and more fulfilled if they ministered in a house church setting.

I was an institutional pastor for more than twenty years and did my best then with what I knew. But it was after spending several months visiting many churches on Sunday mornings that I had my first glimpse of what it is like to attend church as a mere "layperson." It was an eye-opener, and I began to understand why so many people are so unenthusiastic about attending church. Like almost everyone except the pastor, I would sit there politely waiting for the service to be over. When it was, at least then I could interact with others as a participant rather than as a bored spectator. That experience was one of several catalysts that started me thinking about a better

alternative, and I began my research on the house church model. I was amazed to discover that millions of house churches exist all over the world, and concluded that house churches have some definite advantages over institutional churches.

Most of the pastors who read this book are not overseeing house churches, but institutional churches. I know that much of what I've written might be initially difficult for them to swallow as it may seem so radical at first. But I ask that they give themselves some time to contemplate what I have to say, and I don't expect them to embrace everything overnight. It is for pastors I have written, motivated by love for them and their churches.

038 - Happy Sheep

Everything about true, biblical house churches is what true believers desire and enjoy.

All true believers long for genuine relationships with other believers, because God's love has been shed abroad in their hearts. Such relationships are part and parcel of house churches. It is what the Bible refers to as fellowship, genuine sharing of one's life with other brothers and sisters. House churches create an environment where believers can do what believers are supposed to do, which is found in the many New Testament "one another" passages. In the house church setting, believers can exhort, encourage, edify, comfort, teach, serve and pray for one another. They can provoke each other to love and good works, confess their sins to each other, bear one another's burdens, and admonish one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. They can weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Such things don't occur very often during the Sunday morning meetings of institutional churches where believers sit and watch. As one house church member told me, "When someone is sick within our body, I don't take a meal to a stranger's house because I signed up for the 'meal ministry.' I naturally take a meal to someone I know and love."

True believers enjoy interaction and involvement with each other. Passively sitting and listening to irrelevant or redundant sermons year after year insults their intelligence and spirituality. Rather, they prefer having an opportunity to share the personal insights they gain concerning God and His Word, and house churches provide that opportunity. Following a biblical model rather than a cultural one, each person "has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14:26). In house churches, no one is lost in the crowd or excluded by a church clique.

True believers desire to be used by God in service. In a house church, there is opportunity for everyone to be used to bless others, and responsibilities are shared among all, so that no one experiences the burnout that is common among committed members of institutional churches. At the minimum, everyone can bring food to share for the common meal, what Scripture seems to refer to as the "love feast" (Jude 1:12). For many house churches, that meal follows the example of the original Lord's Supper, which was part of an actual Passover meal. The Lord's Supper is not, as a little boy referred to it in a previous institutional church I pastored, "God's holy snack." The idea of eating a small wafer and drinking a little juice among strangers during a few seconds of a church service is utterly foreign to the Bible and to biblical house churches. The sacramental meaning of Communion is enhanced manifold during a shared meal among disciples who love each other.

In a house church, worship is simple, sincere and participatory, not a performance. True believers love to worship God in spirit and truth.

039 - Doctrinal Balance and Toleration

In the casual and open forums of small church gatherings, all teaching can be scrutinized by anyone who can read. Brothers and sisters who know and love each other are inclined to respectfully consider viewpoints that differ from theirs, and even if the group doesn't reach a consensus, love, not doctrine, still binds them together. Any teaching by any person in the group, including elders/pastors/overseers, is subject to loving examination by anyone else, because the Teacher indwells every member (see 1 John 2:27). The built-in checks and balances of a biblical model help prevent it from becoming doctrinally derailed.

This is quite a contrast from the norm in modern institutional churches, where church doctrine is established from the start and not to be challenged. Consequently, bad doctrines endure indefinitely, and doctrine becomes the litmus test of acceptance. For this same reason, one point in a single sermon can result in the immediate exodus of dissenters, who all jump ship to temporarily find some "like-minded believers." They know there is no sense in even talking to the pastor about their doctrinal disagreement. Even if he was persuaded to change his viewpoint, he would have to keep it hidden from many in the church as well as from those of higher rank within his denomination. Doctrinal differences within institutional churches produce pastors who are some of the most skilled politicians in the world, orators who speak in vague generalities and avoid anything that could result in controversy, leading everyone to think he is in their camp.

034 - The Only Kind of Church in the Bible

First, and foremost, institutional churches that meet in special buildings are unknown to the New Testament, whereas house churches were clearly the norm in the early church:

And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying (Acts 12:12; emphasis added).

...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly [but not in church buildings, obviously] and from house to house...(Acts 20:20; emphasis added)

Greet Prisca and Aquila...Also greet the church that is in their house (Rom. 16:3-5; emphasis added; see also Romans 16:14-15 for mention of two other probable house churches in Rome).

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house (1 Cor. 16:19; emphasis added).

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house (Col. 4:15; emphasis added).

And to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house... (Philem. 1:2; emphasis added).

It has been argued that the only reason the early church didn't build church buildings is because the church was still in her infancy. But that infancy lasted through quite a few decades of recorded New Testament history (and more than two centuries after it). So if the building of church buildings is a sign of the church's maturity, the church of the apostles of which we read in the book of Acts didn't ever mature.

I suggest that the reason none of the apostles ever built a church building is because such a thing, at bare minimum, would have been considered outside of God's will, since Jesus left no such example or instruction. He made disciples without special buildings, and He told His disciples to make disciples. They would have not seen any need for special buildings. It is just that simple. When Jesus told His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples, His disciples did not think to themselves, "What Jesus wants us to do is to build buildings and give sermons to people there once a week."

Additionally, building special buildings may even have been considered a direct violation of Christ's commandment to not lay up treasures on the earth, wasting money on something that was entirely unnecessary, and robbing God's kingdom of resources that could be used for transformational ministry.

035 - Biblical Stewardship

This leads to the second advantage that house churches have over institutional churches: The house church model promotes godly stewardship of its members' resources, which is certainly an extremely important aspect of discipleship.[1] No money is wasted on church buildings, owning, renting, repairing, expanding, remodeling, heating or cooling them. Consequently, what would have been wasted on buildings can be used to feed and clothe the poor, spread the gospel, and make disciples, just like it did in the book of Acts. Think of the good that could have been done for God's kingdom if the billions of dollars spent on church buildings had been used for spreading the gospel and serving the poor! It is almost unimaginable.

Moreover, house churches that consist of no more than twenty people could actually be overseen by "tent-making" (that is, "non-paid") elders/pastors/overseers, a real possibility when there are a number of mature believers in a house church. Such churches would require virtually no money at all to operate.

Of course, the Bible seems to indicate that elders/pastors/overseers should be paid in proportion to their labor, so those who devote their full time to ministry should make their full living from it (see 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Ten wage earners in a house church who tithe can support one pastor at their average standard of living. Five tithers in a house church can free up a pastor to devote half his workweek to his ministry.

Following the house church model, money that would be used on buildings is freed to support pastors, and so institutional pastors should not think that the proliferation of house churches threatens their job security. Rather, it could mean that many other men and women could realize the desire God has placed in their hearts to serve Him in vocational ministry.[2] That in turn, would help accomplish the goal of making disciples. Moreover, a house church with twenty wage earners could potentially give one half of its income to mission outreach and the poor.[3]

If an institutional church transitioned to a network of house churches, the people who might lose their paying jobs would be church administrative and program support staff and perhaps some staff members with specialty ministries (for example, child and youth ministers in larger churches) who would be unwilling to trade ministries that have little biblical basis for ministries that do. House churches don't need child and youth ministers because parents are given that responsibility in the Bible, and people in house churches generally strive to follow the Bible rather than the norms of cultural Christianity. Christian youth who don't have Christian parents can be incorporated into house churches and discipled just as they are incorporated into institutional churches. Does anyone wonder why there are no "youth pastors" or "children's pastors" mentioned in the New Testament? Such ministries didn't exist for the first 1900 years of Christianity. Why are they suddenly essential now, and primarily in wealthy western countries?[4]

Finally, in poorer nations in particular, pastors often find it impossible to rent or own church buildings without being subsidized by Western Christians. The undesirable consequences of this

dependency are manifold. The fact is, however, that for 300 years the problem didn't exist in Christianity. If you are pastor in a developing nation whose congregation can't afford your own church building, you don't need to flatter some visiting American in hopes of striking gold. God has already solved your problem. You really don't need a church building to successfully make disciples. Follow the biblical model.

[1] See "Stewardship and Money".

[2] Although it may sound radical, the only real reason that church buildings are needed is because of the lack of leaders who would oversee smaller house churches, which is the result of poor discipleship of potential leaders within institutional churches. Could it be that pastors of large institutional churches are actually guilty of robbing God-called pastors within their congregations of their rightful ministries? Yes.

[3] This one-to-ten or -twenty ratio should not be considered pastoral overkill in light of Jesus' biblical model of discipling twelve men and Moses' delegated judges over ten people (see Ex. 18:25). Most institutional pastors oversee many more people than they can effectively disciple on their own.

[4] We might also question why there are no "senior pastors," "associate pastors" or "assistant pastors" mentioned in Scripture. Again, these titles that seem so essential in the modern church because of its structure were unnecessary in the early church because of its structure. House churches of twenty people don't need senior, associate and assistant pastors.

036 - The End of Fragmented Families

Another advantage that house churches have is this: they excel at discipling children and teens. One of the great falsehoods perpetrated by institutional churches today (especially large ones in the United States) is that they provide wonderful ministries to children and youth. Yet they hide the fact that the large majority of the children who experience years of fun attending their exciting children and youth ministries never return to church again upon "leaving the nest." (Ask any youth pastor for the statistics—he should know them.)

Additionally, churches that have youth pastors and children's pastors continually promote the falsehood to parents that they are either incapable or not responsible for their children's spiritual training. Again, "We'll take care of your children's spiritual training. We're the trained professionals."

The system as it stands breeds failure, because it creates a cycle of ever-increasing compromise. It begins with parents who are looking for churches that their kids enjoy. If teenager Johnny says on the ride home that he had fun in church, the parents are thrilled, because they equate Johnny's enjoying church with Johnny's being interesting in spiritual things. They are often dead wrong.

Success-driven senior pastors want their churches to grow, and so youth and children's pastors often leave staff meetings feeling pressure to create "relevant" programs that kids think are fun. ("Relevant" is always secondary to "fun," and "relevant" doesn't necessarily mean, "Lead kids to repent, believe, and obey Jesus' commandments.") If the kids can be sold the program, naïve parents will return (with their money), and the church will grow.

The success of youth groups in particular is measured by attendance numbers. Youth pastors find themselves doing whatever it takes to pack them in, and that too often means compromising genuine spirituality. Pity the poor youth pastor who hears reports that parents are murmuring to the senior pastor that their kids are complaining about his boring or condemning messages.

But what a blessing youth pastors could be in the body of Christ if they became house church leaders. They normally already have great relational skills and possess young zeal and no lack of energy. Many of them are only youth pastors because that is the required first step for them to gradually acquire the super-human skills required to survive being senior pastors. Most are more than capable of pastoring a house church. What they've been doing in their youth group could well be closer to the biblical model of a church than what has been going on in the main sanctuary of the church! The same could be said of children's pastors, who might be miles ahead of most senior pastors in being able to serve in house churches where everyone, including children, sits in one small circle, all participating and even enjoying some food together.

Children and teens are naturally better disciplined in house churches, as they experience true Christian community and have opportunities to participate, ask questions, and relate to people of other ages, all as part of a Christian family. In institutional churches they are continually exposed to a big show and "fun" learning, experience very little if any true community, are often made very

aware of pervasive hypocrisy, and just as in school, only learn to relate to their peers.

But in a gathering of all ages, what about babies who cry or little children who become restless?

They should always be enjoyed, and practical steps can be taken to handle them when they pose problems. They can, for example, be taken to another room to be entertained, or given crayons and paper to color on the floor. In the community of a house church, the babies and children are not problems who are dropped off at the nursery staffed by a stranger. They are loved by everyone in their extended family. A baby who starts to cry in an institutional church is often a disturbance to the formality of the service and an embarrassment to the parents who may feel the disapproving stares of strangers. A baby who starts to cry in a house church is surrounded by his family, and no one minds the reminder that a little gift from God is in their midst, a person they've all held in their arms.

Parents whose children are uncontrolled can be gently taught by other parents what they need to know. Again, believers have genuine, caring relationships. They aren't gossiping about one another as is so often the case in an institutional church. They know and love each other.

042 - What Happens at a House Church Gathering?

Not every house church needs to be structured the same, and there is room for a lot of variation. Every house church should reflect its own cultural and social nuances—one reason why house churches can be very effective in evangelism, especially in countries that have no Christian cultural tradition. House church members don't invite their neighbors to a church building that appears completely foreign to them where they would be involved in rituals that are completely foreign to them—major obstacles to conversions. Rather, they invite their neighbors to a meal with their friends.

The common meal is generally a major component of a house church meeting. For many house churches, that meal includes or is the Lord's Supper, and each individual house church can decide how to best bring out its spiritual significance. As previously mentioned, the original Lord's Supper began as an actual Passover meal that was packed with spiritual significance by itself. Celebrating the Lord's Supper as a meal or part of a meal is the apparent pattern followed when the early believers gathered. We read of the early Christians:

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart (Acts 2:42, 46; emphasis added).

The early Christians were literally taking loaves of bread, breaking them, and sharing them together, something that was done at practically every meal in their culture. Could that breaking of bread during a meal have had some spiritual significance to the early Christians? The Bible doesn't say for certain. However, William Barclay writes in his book, *The Lord's Supper*, "It is not in doubt that the Lord's Supper began as a family meal or a meal of friends in a private house....The idea of a tiny piece of bread and a sip of wine bears no relation at all to the Lord's Supper as it originally was....The Lord's Supper was originally a family meal in a household of friends." It is amazing that every modern biblical scholar agrees with Barclay, yet the church still follows its tradition rather than God's Word on this issue!

Jesus commanded His disciples to teach their disciples to obey all that He had commanded them, so when He commanded them to eat bread and drink wine together in remembrance of Him, they would have taught their disciples to do the same. Could that have been done at common meals? It certainly seems as if it was when we read some of Paul's words to the Corinthians believers:

Therefore when you meet together [and he is not talking about meeting in church buildings, because there were none] it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk (1 Cor. 11:20-21; emphasis added).

How would such words make any sense if Paul was speaking about the Lord's Supper as it is practiced in modern churches? Have you ever heard of the problem of anyone in a modern church service taking his own supper first, and one being hungry while another one is drunk in conjunction

with the Lord's Supper? Such words would only make sense if the Lord's Supper was done in conjunction with a real meal. Paul continues:

What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God [remember, Paul was not writing about a church building, but a gathering of people, the church of God], and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you (1 Cor. 11:22).

How would people be shamed who had nothing if what was being done was not in the context of an actual meal? Paul was pointing out the fact that some of the Corinthian believers who arrived earliest at their gatherings ate their own meal without waiting for the others to arrive. When some arrived who were perhaps so poor that they brought no food to share at the common meal, they were not only left hungry, but also shamed because it was so obvious they had brought nothing.

Immediately after this, Paul wrote more about the Lord's Supper, a sacrament that he "received from the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:23), and he recounted what happened at the first Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 11:24-25). He then warned the Corinthians against partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, stating that if they didn't judge themselves, they could actually eat and drink judgment upon themselves in the form of weakness, sickness and even premature death (see 1 Cor. 11:26-32).

He then concluded,

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment (1 Cor. 11:33-34).

Contextually, the offense being committed at the Lord's Supper was inconsideration of other believers. Paul again warned that those who were eating their own supper first at what was supposed to be a shared, common meal, were in danger of being judged (or disciplined) by God. The solution was simple. If one was so hungry that he couldn't wait for the others, he should eat something before he came to the gathering. And those who arrived earliest should wait for those who arrived later for the meal, a meal that apparently included or was the Lord's Supper.

When we look at the entire passage, it seems clear Paul was saying that if it was the Lord's Supper that was being eaten, it would be done in a way that it was pleasing to the Lord, reflecting love and consideration for each other.

In any case, it is crystal clear that the early church practiced the Lord's Supper as part of a common meal in homes without an officiating clergy. Why don't we?

043 - Bread and Wine

The nature of the elements of the Lord's Supper are not the most important thing. If we must strive for perfect imitation of the original Lord's Supper, we would have to know the exact ingredients of the bread and the exact kind of grapes from which the original wine was made. (Some of the church fathers during the first few centuries strictly prescribed that the wine had to be diluted with water, otherwise the Eucharist was being practiced improperly.)

Bread and wine were some of the most common elements of the ancient Jewish meals. Jesus gave profound significance to two things that were incredibly common, foods that practically everyone consumed each day. Had He visited another culture at a different time in history, the first Lord's Supper may have consisted of cheese and goat's milk, or rice cakes and pineapple juice. So any food and drink could potentially represent His body and blood at a common meal shared among His disciples. The important thing is the spiritual significance. Let us not neglect the spirit of the law while succeeding at keeping the letter of it!

It is not necessary that common meals be deathly solemn. The early Christians, as we already read, broke "bread from house to house...taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46; emphasis added). Seriousness, however, is certainly appropriate during that portion of the meal when Jesus' sacrifice is remembered and the elements are consumed. Self-examination is always appropriate before eating the Lord's Supper, as indicated by Paul's solemn words of warning to the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Any transgression of Christ's commandment to love one another is an invitation to God's discipline. Any and all strife and division should be resolved before the meal. Every believer should examine himself, and confess any sins, which would be the equivalent of "judging yourself," to use Paul's words.

044 - The Spirit Manifested Through the Body

The common meal could occur before or after a meeting in which worship, teachings and spiritual gifts are shared. It is up to each individual house church to determine its format, and formats can vary from gathering to gathering of the same house church.

It is very clear from Scripture that the early church gatherings were quite different from modern institutional church services. In particular, 1 Corinthians 11-14 gives us an abundance of insight into what happened when the early Christians gathered, and there isn't any reason to think that the same format cannot and should not be followed today. It is also clear that what occurred in the early church gatherings described by Paul could only have happened in small group settings. What Paul described could not have occurred logistically in a large meeting.

I will be the first to admit that I don't understand all that Paul wrote within those four chapters of 1 Corinthians. However, it seems obvious that the most outstanding characteristic of the gatherings described in 1 Corinthians 11-14 was the Holy Spirit's presence among them and His manifestation through members of the body. He gave gifts to individuals for the edification of the entire body.

Paul lists at least nine spiritual gifts: prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom, discerning of spirits, gifts of healings, faith, and working of miracles. He does not state that all of these gifts were manifested at every gathering, but certainly implies the possibility of their operation and seems to summarize some of the more common manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 14:26:

What is the outcome then, brethren? 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.

Let's consider all five of these common manifestations, and in a later chapter more thoroughly consider the nine gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

First on the list is the psalm. Spirit-given psalms are mentioned by Paul in two of his other letters to churches, underscoring their place in Christian gatherings.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Eph. 5:18-19).

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16).

The difference between psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is unclear, but the primary point is that all are based on Christ's words, are Spirit-inspired, and should be sung by believers to teach and admonish one another. Certainly many of the hymns and choruses that believers have sung

throughout church history would fall into one of those categories. Unfortunately, too many modern hymns and choruses lack biblical depth, indicating they were not Spirit-given, and because they are so shallow, have no real value to teach and admonish believers. Nevertheless, believers who gather in house churches should expect that the Spirit will not only inspire individual members to lead well-known Christian songs, old and new, but will also give special songs to some of the members that can be utilized for the common edification. Indeed, how special it is for churches to have their own Spirit-given songs!

045 - Teaching

Second on Paul's list is teaching. This again indicates that anyone might share a Spirit-inspired teaching at a gathering. Of course, every teaching would be judged to see if it lined up with the apostles' teaching (as everyone was devoted to that: see Acts 2:42) and we should do the same today. But note that there is no indication here or anywhere in the New Testament that the same person gave a sermon every week when local churches met, dominating the gathering.

There were, in Jerusalem, larger gatherings at the Temple at which the apostles taught. We know that elders were also given teaching responsibility in churches, and that some people are called to a teaching ministry. Paul did a lot of teaching, publicly and from house to house (see Acts 20:20). In the small gatherings of believers, however, the Holy Spirit might use others to teach besides apostles, elders or teachers.

When it comes to teaching, it would seem that we would be greatly advantaged over the early church to be able to bring personal copies of the Bible with us to our gatherings. On the other hand, perhaps our easy access to the Bible has helped us elevate doctrine above loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors as ourselves, robbing us of the very life that God's Word was meant to impart. We have been doctrinalized to death. Many small group Bible studies are every bit as irrelevant and boring as Sunday morning sermons. A good rule to follow in regard to house church teachings is this: If the older children aren't hiding their boredom, the adults are probably hiding theirs. Kids are great truth barometers.

046 - Revelation

Third, Paul lists "revelation." That could mean anything that is revealed by God to some member of the body. For example, Paul specifically mentions how an unbeliever might visit a Christian gathering and have "the secrets of heart...disclosed" by means of gifts of prophecy. The result is that he would be "convicted" and "called to account" and "will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you" (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

Here we once again see that the real presence of the Holy Spirit was an expected feature of church gatherings, and that supernatural things would occur because of His presence. The early Christians really believed Jesus' promise that, "Where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). If Jesus Himself was in their midst, miracles could happen. They literally "worshipped in the Spirit of God" (Phil. 3:3).

In any case, prophecy, which I will say more about shortly, might contain revelation about people's hearts. But revelation could be given about other things and by other means, such as through dreams or visions (see Acts 2:17).

047 - Tongues and Interpretation

Fourth, Paul listed two gifts that work together, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. In Corinth, there was an overabundance and abuse of speaking in tongues. Namely, people were speaking in tongues during the church gatherings and there was no interpretation, so no one knew what was being said. We might wonder how the Corinthians could be blamed, as it would seem the fault of the Holy Spirit for giving people the gift of tongues without giving anyone the gift of interpretation. There is a very satisfactory answer to that question which I will address in a later chapter. In any case, Paul did not forbid speaking in tongues (as do many institutional churches). Rather, he forbade the forbidding of speaking in tongues, and declared this was the Lord's commandment (see 1 Cor. 14:37-39)!^[1] It was a gift that, when used properly, could edify the body and affirm God's supernatural presence in their midst. It was God speaking through people, reminding them of His truth and His will.

Paul did make a strong case in chapter 14 for the superiority of prophecy over non-interpreted tongues-speaking. He strongly encouraged the Corinthians to desire to prophesy, and this indicates that gifts of the Spirit are more likely to be manifested among those who desire them. Similarly, Paul admonished the Thessalonian believers, "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances" (1 Thes. 5:19). This indicates that believers can "quench" or "put out the fire of" the Spirit by harboring a wrong attitude towards the gift of prophecy. That is, no doubt, why the gift of prophecy is so rarely manifested among most believers today.

[1] I am aware, of course, that there are those who relegate all supernatural manifestations of the Spirit to the first century, at which time they supposedly ceased. Thus, we have no reason to seek what the early church experienced, and speaking in tongues is no longer valid. I have little sympathy with such people who are like modern-day Sadducees. As one who has on several occasions praised God in Japanese according to Japanese speakers who heard me, and having never learned Japanese, I know these gifts have not ceased to be given by the Holy Spirit. I also wonder why these Sadducees maintain the Holy Spirit still calls, convicts and regenerates sinners, but deny the Spirit's work beyond those miracles. This kind of "theology" is the product of human unbelief and disobedience, has no scriptural support, and actually works against Christ's goal. It is direct disobedience to Christ according to what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 14:37.

048 - How to Start

House churches are birthed by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of a house-church planter or an elder/pastor/overseer who is given a vision for a house church by God. Keep in mind that a biblical elder/pastor/overseer may be what the institutional church refers to as a mature layperson. No house church planter needs a formal ministry education.

Once the vision for a house church is given by the Spirit to the founder, he needs to seek the Lord regarding others who might join him. The Lord will bring him in contact with people with a similar vision, confirming his leading. Or he may be led to receptive unbelievers whom he can lead to Christ and then disciple in a house church.

Those who are just beginning a house church adventure should anticipate that it will take time for the members to feel comfortable with each other and learn to relate and flow with the Spirit. It will be trial and error along the way. The concepts of every-member participation, biblical servant leadership, equipping elders, the Holy Spirit's leading and gifts, a common meal, and a casual yet spiritual atmosphere are quite foreign to those who are only familiar with institutional church services. Thus the application of grace and patience is wise as a new house church is birthed. The initial format may be more a home Bible study, with one person leading worship, another sharing a prepared teaching, and then closing with an opportunity for corporate prayer, fellowship and a meal. However, as the biblical format for house churches is studied by the group, the elder/pastor/overseer should encourage the members to strive for God's best. Then, enjoy the ride!

House church meetings can circulate from one member's house to another each week, or one person can open his home each week. Some house churches occasionally move to scenic outdoor spots when the weather is nice. The meeting time and place does not have to be Sunday morning, but anytime that best works for the members. Finally, it is best to start small, with no more than twelve people.

049 - How to Transition from Institution to House Church

Most likely, the majority of pastors who are reading this are working within the structures of institutional churches, and perhaps you, dear reader, are one of them. If I've touched a chord within you that longs for the kind of church I've been describing, then you are already wondering how you can make the transition. Let me encourage you to take your time. Start by teaching only biblical truth and doing whatever you can within the framework of your existing structure to make disciples who obey Jesus' commandments. True disciples are much more likely to want to make the transition to a biblical church structure as they understand it. Goats and religious people are much more likely to resist any such transitions.

Second, study what Scripture says on the subject and teach your congregation about house church structures and their inherent blessings. You could eventually cancel your midweek or Sunday evening church service to begin weekly cell meetings in homes overseen by mature believers. Encourage everyone to attend. Increasingly pattern those meetings to follow the format of the biblical model of house churches as closely as possible. Then, allow time for the people to begin to fully enjoy the blessings of their small group.

Once most everyone is enjoying the home meetings, you might announce that a certain Sunday in the next month is going to be "Early Church Sunday." That Sunday, the church building will be closed and everyone will go to homes to meet just like the early church did, enjoying a full meals together, the Lord's Supper, fellowship, prayer, worship, shared teaching and spiritual gifts. If it is a success, you could start having such meetings one Sunday of every month, then eventually two Sundays, and then three Sundays. Eventually, you could release every group to be an independent house church, free to grow and multiply, and perhaps come together for larger meetings once every couple of months.

This whole transition process I've described could take from one to two years.

Or, if you want to go even more cautiously, you could begin just one home gathering with a few of your most interested members that you lead yourself. (Again, house churches don't have to meet on Sunday mornings.) It could be presented as an experiment and would certainly be a learning experience for all.

If it succeeds, then appoint an overseer and release the group to become an independent church that would only join the institutional Sunday service once per month. That way the new church would still be a part of the mother church, and would not be viewed so negatively by those still within the institutional congregation. That could also help influence others within the church to consider being part of another house church being planted by the institutional church.

If the first group grows, prayerfully divide it so that both groups have good leaders and sufficient gifts within their members. Both groups could meet together in a larger celebration on agreed-upon occasions, perhaps once a month or once every three months.

Regardless of the path you take, keep your eye on the goal even through the disappointments, of which there will likely be a few. House churches consist of people, and people cause problems. Don't give up.

It is highly unlikely that everyone in your entire institutional church congregation will make such a transition, so you would have to decide at what point you will personally begin to devote yourself completely to a house church or group of house churches, leaving the institution behind. That will be a significant day for you!

050 - The Ideal Church

Could a pastor of a house church actually be more successful in God's eyes than a pastor of a mega-church with a huge building and thousands in attendance every Sunday? Yes, if he is multiplying obedient disciples and disciple-makers, following Jesus' model, as opposed to simply gathering goats once a week to watch a concert and listen to an entertaining speech sanctified by a few out-of-context scriptures.

A pastor who determines to follow the house church model will never have a large congregation of his own. In the long run, however, he will have much lasting fruit, as his disciples make disciples. Many pastors of "small" congregations of 40 or 50 people who are striving for more might need to adjust their thinking. Their churches might already be too large. Perhaps they should stop praying for a bigger building and start praying about who should be appointed to lead two new house churches. (Please, when that happens, don't give your new denomination a name and yourself the title of "bishop"!)

We need to eradicate the thinking that bigger is better when it comes to church. If we were to judge purely on a biblical basis, single congregations consisting of hundreds of undisciplined spectators who meet in special buildings would be considered quite strange. If any of the original apostles visited modern institutional churches, they would be scratching their heads!

051 - A Final Objection

It is often said that in the Western world where Christianity has already become part of the culture that people will never accept the idea of churches meeting in homes. It is thus argued that we must stay with the institutional model.

First, this is proving not to be true, as the house church movement is gaining rapid momentum in the Western world.

Second, people already gladly meet in homes for parties, meals, fellowships, Bible studies and home cell groups. Accepting the idea of a church in a house takes a very small adjustment of thinking.

Third, it is true that religious people, "spiritual goats," will never accept the concept of house churches. They will never do anything that might potentially make them appear odd to their neighbors. But true disciples of Jesus Christ certainly accept the concept of house churches once they understand the biblical basis. They quickly realize how unnecessary church buildings are for discipleship. If you want to build a big church with "wood, hay and straw" (see 1 Cor. 3:12), you will need a building, but it will all burn in the end. But if you want to multiply disciples and disciple-makers, building the church of Jesus Christ with "gold, silver and precious stones," then you need not waste money and energy on buildings.

It is interesting that the greatest indigenous evangelistic movement in the world today, the "back to Jerusalem" movement of the Chinese house churches, has adopted a specific strategy to evangelize the 10/40 window. They say, "We have no desire to build a single church building anywhere! This allows the gospel to spread rapidly, is harder for authorities to detect, and enables us to channel all our resources directly into gospel ministry."^[1] A wise and biblical example to follow indeed!

[1] Brother Yun, Back to Jerusalem, p. 58.

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