

(Practical Discipleship) 4. Discipleship and Church Matters

by Zac Poonen

A disciple of Jesus can never be a loner and must live in fellowship with other disciples in a local church, built on the foundation of the fear of the Lord.

Scripture: Proverbs 9:10, Matthew 18:18-20, Luke 11:13, John 13:35, 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, Galatians 2:20, Hebrews 3:13, James 2:1, 1 Peter 4:11

Topics: "Church Unity", "Discipleship"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes that true discipleship cannot exist in isolation; it thrives in community within a local church where love and unity among believers are paramount. He highlights that the fear of the Lord is foundational for wisdom and church building, warning against the dangers of partiality and the need for spiritual gifts to edify the Body of Christ. Poonen illustrates the importance of self-judgment and the necessity of leaders who wield the 'sword' of God's Word to maintain purity and integrity in the church. He calls for a church that prioritizes fellowship over mere evangelism, ensuring that it is a safe haven for all believers. Ultimately, he urges disciples to seek spiritual gifts not for personal gain but to serve and bless others, reflecting the true nature of Christ's Body.

Transcript

A disciple of Jesus can never be a loner. He will always live in fellowship with other disciples in a local church.

Jesus said that the primary mark of His disciples would be "love for one another" (John 13:35). This is possible only when the disciple is related to other disciples. So there cannot be any such thing as a lonely disciple.

John 12:24 makes it clear that only the grain of wheat that does not fall into the ground and die will remain alone. The grain that dies however will bear much fruit: Such a disciple will either find other disciples or make other disciples and then be built together with them to form a local church that will be an expression of the Body of Christ. Every disciple must be a part of such a local church. If you are alone, it must be because you have not fallen into the ground and died to yourself.

The Fear of the Lord

The church is pictured in the New Testament as a house that God is building; and Proverbs 24:3 states that a house can be built only by wisdom.

A disciple does not become wise by merely studying the Scriptures. That only increases his knowledge. It is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). The fear of the Lord is the ABC of the Christian life. James 3:17 states that "the wisdom from above is first of all pure." Therefore all who want to build the Body of Christ must learn the fear of the Lord first. They must be able to say to others: "Come and I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 34:10).

We may emphasise doctrinal accuracy, emotional experiences, praise and worship, evangelism and whatever. But if the foundation of the fear of the Lord is absent underneath it all, everything that we've built will collapse one day.

The church cannot be built by programs, activities, money, human strategies or by any principle of the business world. Christian work that is done by such principles may look impressive to human eyes. But when God tests it by fire, it will be seen to be only wood, hay and straw (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

The distinguishing feature of God's house is self-judgment (1 Peter 4:17) - a self-judgment that is the result of living before God's face. Isaiah, Job and John all saw their own nothingness and sin when they saw God (See Isaiah 6:5; Job 42:5, 6; Revelation 1:17).

When Adam and Eve violated God's holiness, they were driven out of Eden. God then stationed cherubs with a flaming sword in front of the tree of life to guard it. This tree of Life represents the eternal life (the divine nature) that Jesus came to give us. The sword typifies the cross that has to slay our Self-life, before we can partake of the divine nature. It is true that the sword first fell on Jesus. But we were crucified with Him too (Galatians 2:20). And "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

Like the cherubs, the elders in a church must wield this sword and proclaim that the only way to the divine life is through death to the flesh. The way back to fellowship with God is via that sword. It is because this sword is not wielded, that most churches today are filled with compromisers and have ceased to be expressions of the body of Christ.

In Numbers 25:1, we read of a time when the Israelites began "to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab". One of the Israelites even brought a Moabite woman into his tent (verse 6). But one priest saved Israel from being destroyed as a nation that day - Phinehas. He was so zealous for God's honour, that he took a spear immediately, went inside that tent and killed both the man and the woman (verses 7, 8). Then God stopped the plague (verse 9). But by then, 24,000 people had already been killed. The plague was spreading so rapidly that if it had not been for that one "cherub who wielded a sword" that day, the plague would have killed the whole camp of Israel.

Do you see how valuable it is to have "a cherub with a sword" in every church?

The plague is spreading rapidly in Christendom today, because there are not enough Phinehases who know how to use the sword. Far too many elders and preachers are men-pleasers who constantly urge us "to love the Midianites". The devil will give us a hundred arguments as to why we should not use the sword in the church. He will even quote Scripture to support his arguments - as he quoted scripture to Jesus.

What did Phinehas have to gain personally by his using the sword? Nothing. On the other hand, he had much to lose - especially a reputation for being kind and gentle!! He would also have been the object of a lot of backbiting and anger from the relatives and friends of the man he killed. But it was the glory and honour of God's Name that motivated Phinehas. And God put His seal of approval on Phinehas' ministry, by saying, "He was jealous with My jealousy" (Numbers 25:11). In the final analysis, God's seal of approval is the only thing that matters. The Lord went on to say about Phinehas, "Behold I give him my covenant of peace, because he was jealous for his God" (Numbers 25:12, 13). In a previous chapter, we saw how the Lord had given the Levites too His covenant of peace because they used the sword (Malachi 2:4, 5).

There is no peace in many churches today because they have sought for peace in a human way - without using God's sword. The result is strife and contention. The peace of Christ is bought with a sword (that slays the Self-life) - both at home and in the church.

Those who are in leadership in a church must burn with a jealous passion for the honour of God's Name, if they are to preserve the church in purity. They must forget about getting a reputation for being kind and gentle, and be concerned only about the glory of God's Name.

It was this passion for the honour of God's Name that made Jesus drive the money-changers and the sellers of doves out of the temple. Zeal for God's house consumed him (John 2:17). This is a major part of what it means to be Christlike. But who is interested in being Christlike if it is going to make him unpopular and misunderstood?

In Hosea 6:1, we are told that God first cuts us open and then binds us up to heal us. It is this balance that we need in every church - cutting open to remove the cancers and then binding up to bring healing. Such a ministry could be fulfilled by two brothers working together in harmony - one doing the cutting open and the other doing the binding up - or by one person alone. The Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to be a team (Acts 13:2), where Paul did most of the cutting-up and Barnabas did most of the binding-up.

Isaiah prophesied about Jesus that His words would be like a sharp sword (Isaiah 49:2) as well as bringing comfort to the weary (Isaiah 50:4). If the Lord speaks in the church today, it will once again be with both sharp and comforting words.

Those who heard Jesus' words in His day either repented and became His disciples, or got offended and left Him. Jesus spoke sharp words to Peter (Matthew 16:23). But Peter did not get offended and leave (John 6:68). Judas Iscariot, on the other hand, was offended even by a small remark that Jesus made to him (See John 12:4-8 with Matthew 26:14). The word of the Lord tests us even today to see whether we will get offended or not. A church where the Word of God is not proclaimed in this way cannot fulfil the purposes of God.

Fellowship and Unity

Love is the primary mark of Jesus' disciples. So fellowship between the disciples of Jesus is vital.

In Matthew 18:18-20, we read of the power that results from such fellowship among the disciples of Jesus. A paraphrase of those verses would read something like this:

The Lord Jesus said,

If two or three disciples of Mine are found in one place and have no disunity between them, but instead a unity like the symphony ("sumphoneo" (Greek) = agree) produced by a number of musical instruments playing together in harmony with each other, then I will be present in their midst. And then, if they ask My Father for anything, it will be granted to them. They will have authority to bind the workings of Satan in any place on earth; and whatever activities of Satan they bind here on earth, will be bound at their source in "the heavenlies" (from where these spirit-powers operate). Such believers will also have the power to deliver (loose) people who are bound by Satan on earth".

The devil knows the amazing power there is in unity and fellowship among Jesus' disciples, but many believers do not know it. And so Satan's main aim has always been to bring disunity among believers so as to make them powerless against him.

What power there would be in a home, if the husband and wife were one in spirit! Satan would never be able to overcome such a home!

What power there would be in a church if even two of its elders were one in spirit! Satan would never be able to overcome such a church!

Satan triumphs over most Christian churches and homes, because such unity and fellowship is not found in them.

I am not talking now about casting out demons. Any believer who has faith for this, can cast out demons in the Name of Jesus, single-handedly, as Jesus said in Mark 16:17. In fact, we read in Matthew 7:22, 23 of even unbelievers who cast out demons in Jesus' Name.

But to bind the activities of Satan, so as to release people from the problems Satan has created for them is far more difficult. A believer cannot do that alone. That requires an expression of the Body of Christ - and the minimum number of disciples that can express Christ's Body is two! Only the authority exercised by such a "body" can keep the powers of darkness at bay.

There must be at least two people at the centre of every church who are totally united with each other. Satan will always target such a core seeking to split it up and divide it. If he succeeds, then that church will become powerless against him. But if that core keeps itself united, Satan will be powerless against that church. This applies to a home as well.

In every church there will be mature people as well as new converts - just as there are babes as well as grown-up children in a family. The babes may fight with each other, backbite, complain and gossip, because they have not understood the way of peace. Such babes will be found in every growing church. But they can never hinder God's work. A core of united elders at the centre of a church can make it an overcoming church. Babes may constitute the vast majority of every church. But God is always seeking to build up the core - both spiritually and numerically. It is this core that fights the battles against Satan and preserves a church in life and victory.

Fellowship in a church is more important than evangelism. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus said that the 99 sheep in the fold were "ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). Who are the ones "who need no repentance"? Obviously those who are judging themselves constantly. Such people do not need any repentance, because they are constantly repenting of their sins. Such disciples have no problem becoming one with each other.

If however the 99 sheep in this fold were constantly fighting with each other and tearing each other to pieces, then the shepherd would not have brought that lost sheep there - for that sheep would be far safer on the mountains than within such a fold where it could be killed!

Our churches must consist of "righteous people who don't need any repentance". Then only will our churches be places of healing and peace into which lost sheep can be safely brought in. The Lord leads His sheep into green pastures and beside still waters. The church Jesus builds is a place of peace. Lost sheep must be brought in only into such a church. Most churches are not like this, because their members are converts and not disciples.

I met a Buddhist convert once, who told me that when he first joined a Christian church, he was horrified to see the strife that went on inside it and had wondered at times, whether Buddhism wasn't better!! Then he found a church where true fellowship and love reigned. Then he was comforted.

Partiality

Another evil that we see in many churches is the showing of partiality (James 2:1). James warns us in that chapter of the danger of giving special seats to rich people in the meetings. Those who do so commit sin (James 2:9). This can apply to making language and caste distinctions as well.

In many churches, believers of one language-group cannot often get along with those of another. Those of one community cannot fellowship with those of another and those of different castes tend to fellowship only among themselves. But if they were disciples of Jesus, the cultured man and the barbarian would both fellowship with each other without any problem.

2 Corinthians 5:16 says that under the new covenant we do not recognise people according to what they are in the flesh. We do not look at skin-colour, community or caste, because everyone is a new creation in Christ (verse 17). In the new creation there are no language, community or caste distinctions. If we don't lead believers into such a life, we will never be able to build the church of Jesus Christ.

A word of caution however, is necessary here. A disciple of Jesus is not called to marry someone from another caste merely to prove that he does not believe in caste-distinctions. Some have done that and ended up in incompatible marriages! Marriage requires a great deal of mutual adjustment and so the areas of difference between the two partners must be as few as possible. Being a disciple of Jesus does not mean that when considering marriage, one will not consider age, education, family background, economic status or caste etc. All of these may need to be considered before one can arrive at a mature decision.

Consider also a situation where, as an elder, you could be guilty of partiality. If you were prompted in your spirit, while preaching, to say something strong, and suddenly realised that your words would hurt some who were listening to you. Then, because you did not want to offend them, you did not say what the Spirit prompted you to say. You did not use the sword as God wanted you to, because you wanted to please men. This is favouritism and can make you lose the anointing of God in your ministry.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Let us now consider the matter of spiritual gifts. These too are essential for building up the Body of Christ.

There are three lists of spiritual gifts given us in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, Romans 12:6-8 & Ephesians 4:11).

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, the exercise of spiritual gifts is compared with the functioning of the members of our physical body. A man may have life and yet be blind, deaf, dumb and paralysed. Many churches are like that. Their members are born again. But they have no gifts of the Holy Spirit with which to serve the Lord - and so they are powerless.

The gifts of the Spirit are what enable the Body of Christ to see, hear, talk and walk. Godliness is the life of the Body of Christ. But what can Christ's Body do for others, without the gifts of the Spirit. What would Jesus Himself have been like if He had no gifts of the Spirit? He would still have overcome sin and lived a holy life. But without the anointing of the Spirit, He would not have been able to preach the way He did, heal the sick, cast out demons or do any miracle.

Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit at the age of 30 did not make Him any holier than He was earlier. His 31st year was not any holier than His 29th year. But with the anointing of the Spirit, He received power to serve others. If Jesus had merely gone around showing people His holy life, He could not have accomplished His Father's purposes. Neither can the church today accomplish God's purposes by merely manifesting holy living to others. Jesus had both holiness and the gifts. His Body today must have both of these too.

The tragedy in Christendom today is that some groups emphasise holiness of life while others emphasise the gifts of the Spirit. But these are not "either-or" options. The Bible says, "Let your clothes be white all the time (live a holy life at all times) and let not oil be lacking on your head (live under the anointing constantly)" (Ecclesiastes 10:8). We need both.

The gifts of the Spirit do not make anyone spiritual. The Corinthian Christians had all the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 1:7). They exercised "the word of wisdom" (one of the gifts of the Spirit) in their meetings. In spite of that, there was not one wise (spiritual) man among them (1 Corinthians 6:5). A word of wisdom can come through a carnal person. But wisdom itself is found only in a spiritual person. One can receive a word of wisdom from God in a moment. But wisdom itself can come only through many years of taking up the cross.

We cannot choose our spiritual gift ourselves, because it is God Who determines what gift will best fit us for our ministry in Christ's Body. But we are told to seek earnestly for those gifts that will build up the Body - and especially for the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1, 12).

When Jesus taught His disciples to ask the Father for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), He illustrated the way they were to ask with a parable of a man who went to his neighbour's house to ask for food. There are two important points to be noticed in this parable:

The man was asking for food not for himself but for someone else.

He kept on asking until he received what he needed.

What do we learn from this parable?

First of all, that we are not to seek the gifts of the Spirit for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. If only those who have sought for the baptism and the gifts of the Spirit had kept this one principle before them, they would have become far more spiritual. And there would have been far less exercise of counterfeit gifts in Christendom today. Unfortunately, most people are taught to seek for the power of the Holy Spirit only in order to get an experience for themselves, and not in order to be a blessing to others.

There are many around us who have needs that God wants to meet - and He wants to meet their needs through us. That's why He allows them to cross our path. He wants us to seek Him for the gifts of the Spirit that are needed to deliver these people and bless them.

A man came to Jesus' disciples once with his demon-possessed child. But the disciples could not help him. The man then went to Jesus and said, "I went to your disciples for help but they could not help me." Are these the words that our neighbours and friends are saying to the Lord today about us?

If we seek the Lord's blessing only for ourselves, we will remain dry. God waters only those who water (help) others (Proverbs 11:25). Perhaps some brother near you needs a word of wisdom to solve his problem. Another may be in need of a word of encouragement for his depressing situation. Yet another may need deliverance from some bondage. We must seek God for the gifts needed to help such people.

Every gift of the Spirit is given that we might bless and edify others. Luke 4:18, 19 tells us the result of Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit. He was enabled thereby to preach good news to the poor, release the captives, give sight to the blind, bring freedom to the downtrodden and proclaim the favourable year of the Lord. Notice that everything mentioned here is for the benefit of others. The gifts of the Spirit did not bring any benefit to the Lord Himself in His life.

We must have a concern for others and a sense of our own inability to help them, if we are to seek for the gifts of the Spirit in the right way.

The second thing that we learn from this parable is that we must keep on asking God for the power of the Holy Spirit until we receive it. God tests us to see whether we are really eager to receive His power and whether we really value His gifts. He also waits to see whether we feel really helpless and unable to serve Him, without His power. Many give up praying too soon because they are self-confident - and thus fail these tests.

The Meetings of the Local Church

Among the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, we find that the word-gifts alone are exercised in the meetings of the local church - teaching, prophecy, tongues and interpretation (See 1 Corinthians 14:26 - ff). We do not read there of any miraculous gifts being exercised in the church-meetings. There is a place in evangelistic ministry, even today, for the exercise of the gift of healing and for the casting out of demons, as a confirmation of the gospel message (Mark 16:15-18). And those who are called to be evangelists (especially to unreached areas) should expect God to give them these abilities. But these do not have to take place in the meetings of every local church.

In the church-meeting the main gift to be exercised is the gift of prophecy. Old Testament prophecy foretold the future. But New Testament prophecy refers to speaking forth God's Word in such a way as "to edify (build up), exhort (challenge), and comfort (encourage)" the church (See 1 Corinthians 14:3). Every church must have brothers who can exercise this gift. A church does not need apostles, teachers and evangelists locally (these ministries can be itinerant), but it does need prophets and shepherds, if it is to grow to maturity.

The prophets of old spoke of "the burden of the Lord" that they carried in their hearts. Aaron carried 12 stones (representing the 12 tribes of Israel) on a breastplate over his heart. This was a picture of how those who preach God's Word (prophecy) today should carry God's people in their hearts - just as a

mother carries a baby in her womb (See Philippians 1:7).

Those gifted with the prophetic word should be the first to speak in the meetings of the church, bringing forth a word from God that is appropriate to the need of that church at that time. They must speak as the spokesmen of God (1 Peter 4:11). There is a vast difference between a religious sermon and a prophetic word. A sermon comes from a man's head as a result of intellectual labour and can impress his hearers. A prophecy however is a word from God that comes through a man's heart. It does not seek to impress the hearers, but to expose the secrets of their hearts and to stir them to action.

Those who respond to such a prophetic word will correct themselves. Those who are irritated by it however, will get angry with the prophet. Prophets are never popular, but hated, misunderstood and persecuted. When Jesus prophesied in the synagogue in Nazareth, the people stopped Him in the middle of His sermon, dragged Him outside and tried to kill Him!!

The Bible says that we must exhort each other daily, lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13). The aim of all prophecy (exhortation) in the church therefore must be to save people from being deceived by their sins. Prophecy exposes the secret sins in their hearts and they can then fall on their faces before God and repent (1 Corinthians 14:25).

If we judge ourselves and "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), the Lord will give us light and save us first from the deceitfulness of our own sin. Then we can preach that same word to others - and save them. We must preach to others only that which has convicted us first.

An important word of caution however is necessary here. Those who listen to the prophetic word are commanded to pass judgment on what they hear (1 Corinthians 14:29). They must judge first of all whether what they heard was in accordance with God's Word and secondly whether it was a word from God to their own hearts. This is because every message preached, every prophecy given and every tongue interpreted, carries with it something of the speaker's own thoughts as well. So we are commanded to "examine everything carefully" and to "hold fast only to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

If the anointing within us does not bear witness to some part of the "prophecy" we hear, then we must reject it. That is the only way to protect ourselves from being deceived (1 John 2:28). Many believers have suffered untold damage in their lives, because they blindly swallowed every "prophecy" they heard as if it were from God Himself and acted on what they heard.

Let me also add a word of caution about imitating other preachers whom you admire. If such imitation is unconscious, it is not serious. But if it is conscious, then you will be the loser, for such imitation will hinder the unique ministry that the Lord has given you, from coming forth through you.

Even though the entire New Testament is inspired by the Holy Spirit, we still see that Paul, Peter and John did not use the same language to express truth. Each of them wrote Scripture with the words that came to them naturally. Paul never once wrote about "being born again", but wrote much about "being crucified with Christ" and about "putting off the old man". When Peter wrote his letter later, he could have imitated Paul's phrases. But he didn't. He used the phrases that came naturally to him and wrote about "suffering in the flesh". John too was unique in the language he used, when he wrote many years later. He did not use either Paul's or Peter's language but wrote instead about being "born of God" - a phrase that was unique to him.

This shows clearly that God does not expect us to use the same words that others use. He does not eradicate our personalities when ministering His Word through us, and make us like secretaries who merely type out what their boss tells them to. God preserves our individuality, even when we are filled and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

In Revelation 21:19, 20, we see the church pictured as a building built with precious stones of many colours. The light that shines through each of these stones is the same - the life of Jesus. But the colours that come through them are varied - red, blue and green etc. Each of us is called to express the life of Jesus - but through our own unique, individual personalities.

If you try to imitate my ministry or the way I preach or write, you will end up frustrated. You must speak from your own life what comes naturally to you - in your own unique way - and then you will be a blessing to the Body of Christ. God wants only one "Zac Poonen" in His church. He doesn't want another. He wants you to be yourself.

In the meetings of the church, all who have a word from the Lord can prophesy, under the authority of the elders. That includes both men and women - for God clearly states that He pours the spirit of prophecy on both men and women (Acts 2:17, 18). If a woman covers her head, God permits her to pray and prophesy in the church-meetings (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Many do not seek to prophesy in the church because of their spiritual laziness or their timidity. Timothy was such a timid man that Paul had to urge him to stir up the gift that God had given him (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6, 7). We must bind the spirits of timidity and unbelief when we come to the church-meetings.

This freedom in the church-meetings can however be taken advantage of by carnal people who love to hear their own voice and who stand up and bore everybody. Such people must be silenced by the elders, because everything in the church must be done "properly and in an orderly manner" (1 Corinthians 14:40). It is unfortunate however, that in most churches today, the elders are either timid or seek the honour of being known as "gentle" brothers, that they do not silence a carnal, long-winded speaker!

Let us bear in mind then that the most important part of a church meeting is not the time of "praise and worship" - although that is essential - but the time when the prophetic word of God is proclaimed.

Spiritual Leadership

Let us now look at the subject of leadership in the church of God.

God appoints elders in every church to lead it in His way (1 Corinthians 14:23; Titus 1:5). An elder is not primarily a preacher but a leader. A "leader" is one who goes ahead of others. He is constantly moving forward. He says, "Follow me as I follow Christ".

Many preachers however say, "Don't follow me. Just look at Christ and follow Him". That sounds humble. But that is not what any of the early apostles said. They invited believers to follow them even as they followed Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17). They did not say this because they were perfect, but because they were moving in the right direction.

Eldership is a relative matter. An illustration will make this clear: When parents are going away from their home for a while, they may ask their eldest son to be the "elder" in their home and to take all decisions during their absence - even if he is only 10 years old. He is certainly not mature. But he is more mature

than the 7-year old and the 4-year old! Once his parents return, he is no longer the elder.

That is how eldership functions in a church too. A young brother can be an elder in a church, if he happens to be the most mature brother in that church. As the others in the church grow, he too grows up along with them. But if he stops growing spiritually, then someone else will one day become the elder brother in that church - the one who has gone ahead of him. So eldership is not a title or an office in God's house, but being mature enough to lead others.

Such leaders are the ones that we must submit to and obey (Hebrews 13:17). In the parable of the man who rented out his farm to tenants, we notice that the owner did not come personally to collect the rent, but sent his servants (Matthew 21:34). Even so the Lord appoints His delegated authorities in the church to represent Him. Jesus told His apostles that when people received them, they were actually receiving the Lord Himself (Matthew 10:40). I am not referring now to the vast majority of priests and preachers and pastors in Christendom today, but only to those whom you yourself recognise as genuine servants of God.

In the church of God, authority is not imposed from above but accepted from beneath.

That means that you need submit only to those elders whom you respect. If you cannot acknowledge an elder as a godly man, you do not have to submit to him. However, in such a case it is best for you to leave that church and find another where you can find a godly elder. Unfortunately, there are not many godly elders in the world today. But where you do find one, you must honour him and appreciate him (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Once you do recognise someone as your elder, you must submit to him. The purpose of submission in the church is the same as in a home: Children are protected from innumerable dangers by submitting to their parents. A godly elder will keep watch over your soul, like a shepherd watches over his sheep.

A true elder should know the spiritual state of each one of his sheep (Proverbs 27:23). If an elder carries his flock on his heart, God will give him discernment, supernaturally if necessary, about the condition of each of his sheep. The messages that such an elder brings forth in the meetings of the church will be the very word that his sheep need - even though he may be unaware of their need.

This then is the primary requirement in all shepherds - they must carry their flock on their hearts. There are many brothers who although not elders, nevertheless have a care and a concern for their fellow-believers. Such brothers are true shepherds in God's sight, and the sheep have confidence in them and come to them for help.

The Church, Money and Christian Workers

A church of disciples must have a clear testimony in the matter of money. We must have no desire to get money, or any favour, or anything else from anyone who comes to our meetings. And they must know that clearly. They must see clearly that we are only interested in blessing them - freely.

In our own churches, we never take an offering during our meetings. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, we believe that all giving to God must be joyful and voluntary. This is difficult to do if an offering is taken publicly. Secondly, all giving to God must be done in secret. It is not possible to give secretly, when people are watching you. (Others may not know how much you are giving, but they will still know you are giving). Thirdly, unbelievers may be present in our meetings and they do not have the privilege to give their money to God. They have to give themselves to God first, before they can give Him

their money (2 Corinthians 8:4, 5; 3 John 7). They must also know that the gospel they hear in the church, is free. They don't have to pay anything to hear it. So we don't embarrass them by taking an offering.

At the same time, in order to give an opportunity to believers to give money to God as an expression of their gratitude, we place a box in the meeting hall, where those who want to give joyfully and secretly can do so.

Most Christian workers are supported by the gifts and offerings of other believers. There is nothing wrong with this, because the Lord has directed that "those who preach the gospel can get their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). It appears as though Peter and most of the other apostles were supported like this - by other believers (1 Corinthians 9:5, 6).

But we see a different example in Paul, who supported himself and served the Lord (See 1 Corinthians 9:15-18; 2 Corinthians 12:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; Acts 20:33-35). In the present circumstances in India, there is a great need for many who are willing to serve the Lord like Paul.

This is the reason why in our churches, almost all of us elders support ourselves like Paul did, and serve the churches. This method has the added advantage, in poor countries like India, of sifting out those who seek to join a church as workers, for financial profit.

Let me now give a few guidelines to those disciples of the Lord who are considering full-time Christian work.

Only if you receive a clear call from God should you go forth into full-time Christian work.

Jesus called only those who were faithfully engaged in a secular job, to be His apostles. This seems to be the general rule in Scripture, although God can make exceptions. There seems to be a number of reasons why God chooses those who are working in secular professions:

God proves a man in his secular job first, to see whether he is hardworking and faithful in handling money. The ones whom Jesus called were faithful and hardworking as fishermen and accountants etc.

The willingness to sacrifice is also tested thereby, because one who gives up his secular job to serve the Lord full-time has to pay a price, unlike one who had no job to give up. By this test, a person can also know whether his "call" is genuinely from God or not. It is easy for those who have nothing to give up to imagine that they are "called by God"!! Many are doing Christian work in India today only because they did not get any other job. It is therefore a profession for them and not a calling.

Only those who have worked in a secular profession will have the necessary experience to teach practical truths to other Christians who are struggling to be faithful in their secular jobs.

When God calls someone to full-time work, He would already have equipped him with some gift of the Spirit for the task to which He is calling him. So, if God is really calling you, He would already have borne witness to your labours (with fruit that lasts), even while you are in secular employment.

Finally, you should consider leaving your secular job only when the pressure of the Lord's work has become so much that there is not enough time for you to do it along with your secular job. You should not become like the many "full-time workers" who do not actually work full time at all, but sit around doing nothing most of the time and then visit a few homes on some evenings and have a couple of meetings a

week. Most of them did more for the Lord when they had a secular job! The devil finds such idle full-time workers to be a fertile field to work in. And they fall into all types of sin - gossiping, adultery etc., - just because they did not have enough work to be occupied with every day.

God is looking for disciples and churches today who will demonstrate the principles of His kingdom to the world around them. May we respond to His call wholeheartedly.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/zac-poonen/practical-discipleship-4-discipleship-and-church-matters/>

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