

Life in the Church Week 4

Not every culture is individualistic. But in the Western world, we tend to look up to Lone Rangers. Our heroes are strong and self-sufficient, and they tend to walk alone. Very often, the Western church tends toward this type of individualism. We hear Jesus's call to take up our cross and follow Him, and we decide to follow no matter what any one else says or does. Of course, this is the right response, but we need to be careful here. While every individual needs to obey Jesus's call to follow, we cannot follow Jesus as individuals. The proper context for every disciple maker is the church. It is impossible to make disciples aside from the church of Jesus Christ. Look at it from this perspective: the New Testament is full of commands to do this or that for "one another." Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, etc. So how can we teach people to "observe all that I have commanded" if they have no one to love, pray for, or encourage? It's impossible to "one another" yourself. It's impossible to follow Jesus alone. We can't claim to follow Jesus if we neglect the church He created, the church He died for, the church He entrusted His mission to.

In this session and the two following sessions, we will place disciple making squarely within the context of the church. This session will examine the way in which we are called to live together as the church. Teaching people to obey what Jesus commanded is a never-ending process that requires us to intertwine our lives with the Christians around us. As disciple makers, we will join together with other believers, help them overcome the sin that holds them back, and challenge them to grow into more effective disciple makers.

The next two sessions will focus on the call to reach out to the people in our local setting and to the rest of the world. In each case, our call is to make disciples, and we must learn to fulfill that calling through the God-ordained vehicle of the church.

Committing Your Life to the Church

First, let's make sure that we are not guilty of belittling God's church in any way. It's not a social club; it's not a building, and it's not an option. The church is life and death. The church is God's strategy for reaching our world. What we do inside the church matters. We tend to equate church life with events and programs. But these are not what make a church. Programs are helpful to the extent that they facilitate the life and mission of the church, but we can't equate well-attended events with the health of the church. God cares about the way we love each other and the way we pursue His mission. The church is a group of redeemed people that live and serve together in such a way that their lives and communities are transformed. What matters is your interaction with the people God has placed in your life. If you are not connected with other Christians, serving and being served, challenging and being challenged, then you are not living as He desires, and the church is not functioning as He intended.

Throughout the Bible, we see pictures of the global church (which includes all followers of Jesus in all locations) and the local church (which includes particular followers of Jesus in a particular location). Out of 114 times that the “church” is mentioned in the New Testament, at least ninety of them refer to specific local gatherings of believers who have banded together for fellowship and mission. God intends for every follower of Jesus to be a part of such a gathering under the servant leadership of pastors who shepherd the church for the glory of God. Despite the clear priority that the Bible puts on believers being part of a local church, many followers of Christ try to live the Christian life apart from serious, personal commitment to a local church. The reasons are many. We are self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the kind of mutual interdependence and even submission and accountability to others that the Bible talks about frightens us. We are often indecisive, hopping from one church to another looking for the “perfect place” and the “perfect people.” Many of us have been hurt in the past by things that have happened to or around us in the church, and others of us simply don’t see the importance of being specifically connected to a local church.

But the Bible says the local church is important. God has entrusted local churches with godly leaders who teach us His Word and care for our souls (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–8; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9). God has united us together in local churches to keep one another from sinning and straying from Christ (Gal. 6:1–5; Matt. 18:15–20). God has commanded us to gather together in local assemblies where we preach God’s Word, celebrate the Lord’s Supper, baptize new believers, and pray for and encourage one another (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24–25). Then we scatter to care for believers and to share the gospel with unbelievers (Acts 2:43–47). Clearly, being a disciple and making disciples involves committing your life to a local church where you are joined together with other believers under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and to express the love of Christ to the world around you.

Q1 Why do you think the New Testament places such a priority on Christians being committed members (or parts) of local churches? How can this priority best be reflected in your life?

Q2 Read Ephesians 4:1–16. How should this passage affect the way you view your responsibility to other Christians in the church?

Bearing One Another’s Burdens

In Part I, we said that every Christian is a minister. Paul said that God gave pastors, teachers, and elders to the church so that they could teach the rest of us to minister. A pastor’s job is not to do all of the ministry in a church, but to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). So the question becomes: Whom should you be ministering to and how? Don’t be overwhelmed by the task of ministering to others. It is just about faithfully serving the people God has placed in your life. Paul explained:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens,

and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1–2) Ministry sounds intimidating until you develop a realistic view of what ministry is really about. Maybe you're not gifted to preach sermons, start a rehabilitation clinic, or lead a marriage retreat. But do you know people who struggle with sin?

Do you know people who are carrying burdens? If so, then your first steps toward ministry are easy: help them. We don't like getting involved in other people's problems. Our own problems are messy enough—why complicate things by taking on other people's junk? But the reason is simple: God calls us to help other people. He created us to function this way. Your problems are not just your problems—ultimately, they belong to the church body that God has placed you in. You are called to encourage, challenge, and help the other Christians in your life, and they are called to do the same for you. If you wait until all of your own issues are gone before helping others, it will never happen. This is a trap that millions have fallen into, not realizing that our own sanctification happens as we minister to others.

Q3 Think about your unique setting and identify a few opportunities that God has given you to minister to the people around you. Have you taken advantage of these opportunities?

Q4 Take a few minutes to meditate on Galatians 6:1–2. What would it look like to help bear someone else's burden? Is there anyone in your life right now whom you should be helping in this way?

Getting beneath the Surface

We have to be clear about what it means to help the people God has placed in our lives. We gravitate toward solutions that are quick and easy. When it comes to helping people, we often address the surface level of the problem but never get down to the heart of the matter. When someone is grieving, we might hand him a book that helped us in a difficult moment. But how many of us would take the time to really invest in his life? Would we listen on a consistent basis and offer help whenever we find a need that we are able to meet? Or when we learn that a friend is struggling with sin, we are quick to explain why that sin is harmful and tell her we will pray for her (whether we follow through or not). But how many of us would take her struggle with sin so seriously that we would walk with her as she works through the issues involved?

It's not that Christians are uncaring. Very often, we really do want to help the people around us however we can, but we get so focused on finding a quick solution to the external behavior that we overlook the real problem. Here's an example. If a friend struggles with anger, we find out what makes him angry, and then keep him away from the things that provoke his anger (e.g., don't drive during rush hour, interact with your boss as little as possible, avoid talking politics). But changing the external situation doesn't change his heart. In reality, his anger is rooted in his heart, and that anger will find a way to express itself even if his circumstances change. When Jesus's disciples started eating without going through the necessary cleansing rituals, the Pharisees accused them of defiling themselves. But Jesus's response calls us to look beyond the external to what is going on in the heart: "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What

comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:18–23) Every struggle with sin that we could possibly encounter in our own lives or in the lives of the people around us are represented in the list Jesus offered here: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Jesus said that these things come from within. In other words, if we are trying to address these problems by regulating a person's circumstances or behavior, then we are wasting our time. These things come "out of the heart of man." Whatever help we can offer people who are struggling with sin has to be aimed at transforming hearts, not behavior.

Q5 Why do you think we tend to focus on the external circumstances and behavior when we try to help people change?

Q6 Using your own words, try to explain why it is essential to get to the heart of the problem rather than merely addressing the circumstances and behavior.

Transformed by the Gospel

So how do we change a person's heart? It's impossible. We might be able to restrain a person's angry outbursts by tying him up and gagging him, but we are powerless to change a person's heart. This is where God's plan of redemption comes into play. The gospel is not merely about "getting us saved," as if we simply pray a prayer and are immediately transported into heaven. God describes "salvation" and the transformation of the Christian life like this: I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27) This is a cataclysmic event. "Getting saved" is not about praying a prayer and then continuing to live our lives as though nothing happened. No, when God enters our lives, we are changed from the inside out.

The good news is that God has acted in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection we are transformed, made new. Our problem lies at the core of our being, but God transforms our hearts. God literally places His Spirit within us and changes us from the inside out. So as we come alongside the broken, hurting people God has placed in our lives, let's remember where our power comes from. These are not mere physical issues that we can correct through hard work. These are spiritual issues that run deeper than we can imagine. Yet God has supplied us with everything we need in order to fulfill His calling. The power to transform hearts and change lives comes from the Holy Spirit (John 6:63), through the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and through prayer (James 5:16–20). As we use the Scriptures to give counsel to others, there is power (Heb. 4:12). As we pray passionately for their hearts to change, there is power. We cannot remove the lust from another's person's heart by our own efforts, but we have the Spirit of God working through us. Through the gospel, people can be set free from the enslaving power of sin (Rom. 6).

Through the gospel, we are actually empowered to uproot the sin in our hearts and live in a way that pleases God (Gal. 5 and Rom. 8). Paul promised: "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13).

Q7 How should the truth of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit affect the way we approach helping people change?

Bearing one another's burdens is not easy, but it is also not optional. We have to face this challenge head on: a church full of isolated individuals feeling defeated by their sin and stripped of their joy was never God's plan for the church. Jesus intended for His church to advance powerfully through the centuries, full of love and joy. Jesus was clear: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Paul reminded us that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is working through us (Eph. 1:15–23; Rom. 8:11). God intends for His church to be a united body, not a cluster of isolated individuals. He has empowered us to bring truth and transformation into the lives of the people around us, not to be satisfied with handing out books and warm wishes. If the church is going to fulfill its God-given mission in our modern world, we are going to have to take our responsibility to one another seriously. We will have to accept His call to bear one another's burdens—even when it's messy, even when we find ourselves in over our heads. So when a sister in Christ is speaking harmful words about another member of the church body, we will take the time to help her see the pride and lack of love in her heart and walk with her as she asks the Spirit to transform her heart on this issue. When we find a brother in Christ who is enslaved to his lustful desires, we will help him to understand the fear of the Lord and call out to God to transform his selfish desires into genuine love. Though you may not have a degree in psychology, you are still called to stand with the Christians in your life as they pursue the healing and transformation that only come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Q8 Would you say that your church body is characterized more by defeat and isolation or the power and transformation of the Holy Spirit? Why do you say that?

Q9 What steps can you take right away to help your church function more like God intended?

Every Member Doing Its Part

The mission of your church is too important to leave to everyone else. The moment you begin to believe that your church can be healthy while you sit on the sidelines, you have given up on God's plan of redemption. God placed you in your unique situation because He wants you to minister to and with the other Christians He has placed around you. Paul's vision for the church included every Christian: We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15–16)

The goal of the church is to grow up in every way into the likeness of Christ. But the church will never reach this goal unless "each part is working properly." This doesn't mean that we will all

function in exactly the same way, but it does mean that we all have a responsibility. It also means that if you are not active in the church, you are hurting your brothers and sisters. One paralyzed leg forces the rest of the body to work twice as hard to make up for that leg's inactivity. God made you to be exactly who you are, and His Spirit has empowered you with unique spiritual abilities, or "gifts." Together, we function as one body. Until you and every person in your church are actively ministering to the people around you, your area will not have an accurate picture of what the church was created to be. When we step outside of ourselves and begin bearing the burdens of the people around us, it is time-consuming, messy, and often confusing. But it is necessary. Helping people change is what discipleship is all about. As we help other Christians follow Jesus, we are going to run into the temptations, lies, and idols that hold them back. It will be difficult, but we know what Jesus has accomplished, and we know how this story will end. We have a part to play in God's plan of redemption. It won't always be fun, but we must be faithful to God's calling.

Q10 Would you say that you have been playing your part in the body of Christ? If so, how might you still need to grow in this? If not, are you ready to get involved? What steps might you need to take?

Q11 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you confidence in the Spirit's power to use you in ministering to other people. Ask Him for the wisdom to know what to do and the discernment to recognize people who need help. Pray that God would use you and your church to continue His plan of redemption in your unique setting.