

Study 6. Equipping the Saints

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: If you could download job skills as in the movie “Matrix,” what job skills would you have downloaded when you were young?

What was the most challenging job or task you ever had to do? How did you approach it?

I want to begin this study by sharing my early experience in the church. My hometown of Harwich, Essex, England, had only around 16,000 people, with many pubs (bars) and few Christians. When I became a Christian, the churches in my hometown were primarily filled with older adults who rarely ventured outside the church walls to share the gospel. I made friends with a couple about the same age as me that led a youth group. The three of us threw ourselves into trying to change the spiritual climate by singing passionate worship songs rather than old hymns.

We wanted to experience a livelier Christian life, which included the gifts of the Spirit in operation among the youth group. This new expression of Christianity did not go well with senior members of the church, who believed the gifts of the Spirit ended with the early church. The godly pastor of the church went through a breakdown, possibly caused by those opposing the renewal in our town. This charismatic church renewal was happening all over England at the time. Many that the Holy Spirit touched left resistant churches and started meeting together in their homes. I spent the formative days of my Christian life in the house church renewal.

Shortly after marrying, the other couple, and my wife and I began a house church, with our first meeting in our living room, no bigger than 12 feet by 12 feet. We had much to learn. I was only three years old in the Lord then, but my friend Roger had just come back from Bible school and had more experience teaching. During that time, the Lord gave me the spiritual gifting of evangelism and encouragement. Sandy and I learned how to share our faith and would talk to individuals in all kinds of situations about the Lord and took the opportunity to pray for people and invite them to our meetings.

We multiplied to three house group meetings in the evenings before beginning to meet on Sundays at a hall for corporate worship and teaching. We saw the Lord do some beautiful things in our small fellowship. God healed people in our church, restored relationships, and added people, and the church grew. I remember that even one of the medical doctors in the town recommended patients come to the church. One man, well known in our city due to an injury he suffered, started coming to the church after his niece encouraged him to seek healing. He had an accident while working on a massive crane at the docks. His harness was not properly fastened, and he fell out of it, rendering him crippled and in terrible pain for sixteen years. After coming to Christ and being baptized in the North Sea, God miraculously healed him, with his healing became front-page news in the area newspaper. It was a healing that was verified and confirmed by his doctor. God was working in our midst even though we knew little about church planting or growth. Again and again, the Lord gave us wisdom and knowledge in many situations. I am glad we had this experience as young Christians. If you find yourself in a situation where others are looking to you for leadership, trust God to give you whatever you need for every case, as we have found that He loves to see this kind of dependence from His children.

I believe the thing we had working for us at that time was that we relied on God for wisdom, knowledge, and counsel. Acutely aware of our need for Him, we recognized He is the One building His church (Matthew 16:18). Sandy and I shared Christ on the streets, in pubs, and on trains, anywhere we could find people that were open to hearing about Jesus. Several years later, one of my friends wanted to confess something to me. He told me what he had thought of me in those early years. He felt that there was something mentally unstable about me because all I wanted to do was talk about Jesus. Of course, I laughed. Today I still love to talk about Jesus but what gives me greater joy than that is to equip others to know what they believe and help them to share it with others. Indeed, the church can multiply when we can *all* share what God has done and is doing. In the day we live, the Lord Jesus calls His church to be the Body of Christ at work in the world and depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through us.

We Are All Ministers

One of the most important things to learn as a disciple is that all disciples are called to ministry. The early church grew up with this concept, and the church multiplied greatly. In the early days of the church, the Lord added to them daily (Acts 2:47). The enemy countered the church's multiplication by introducing heresy into the church, that some were to be the professionals while others were to watch. We call it today the division of the clergy from the laity (Laity means ordinary people as distinct from professionals). This separation of people is like the modern football game (soccer), where 22 men run ragged doing all the work while all the rest watch and are substantially in need of exercise. Let us not believe that only professionals can do ministry, break the bread of communion, preach the gospel and baptize individuals.

Ignorance of the Scriptures allowed authoritative leaders to take advantage of the people, increase their power and keep the everyday believer in Christ in the dark. Printing of the Bible didn't take place until 1456. Before that, the Scriptures were hand copied and chained to the pulpits under lock and key. This period in Europe was called the Dark Ages. These religious leaders fought hard to keep the Bible from ordinary people. Many godly men were killed for translating and printing the Scriptures into different languages. In the Middle Ages, even those translating the Bible couldn't believe the Scripture text because the culture of the day had ingrained into the people this separation of the clergy and laity, something not found in the Bible. For instance, did you know that our English translations of the Book of Ephesians contained a misplaced comma clear up until 1903?¹ The error was in Ephesians 4:11-12. Here is how it read *before* the mistake was discovered and rectified:

¹¹And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹²For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12 KJV).

The original Greek manuscripts have no comma after the word *saints* and before the word "*for*." The addition of the one comma makes it sound as if the various gifted individuals mentioned are

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p.166.

solely responsible for carrying out the work of the ministry. All modern translations have corrected the error. However, this misguided assumption is rampant in the church today in most of the western world. Many professional ministers are trained in a non-biblical philosophy of ministry that puts the responsibility of serving in ministry on a few and perpetuates the idea that just a few are called to do the work. That is why our churches today have a majority of spectators. Let's now read a modern translation of Ephesians and see who is called to minister (serve) and what gifted leaders are responsible for doing:

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:11-16 NIV).

What are the gifted ministers to do? What's their role? Has your idea of the church been shaped by this false philosophy of ministry that only professionals should do the work? Share your thoughts.

We first see that God has given specific individuals gifts to equip the church. The fruit of an evangelist's ministry is not only to lead people to Christ but also to model, teach, and train others to do the same. I believe this is the 100-fold return as opposed to the 30-fold or 60-fold return (Mark 4:8). The church is to grow exponentially as each part does its work.

These four-fold gift ministries (there is a sound scriptural reason to believe that the pastor-teacher role is one gifted person) rotated around the New Testament house churches, teaching and equipping the church to do the work. As the above Scripture mentions, their task was to be supporting ligaments to the spiritual body of Christ. What is a supporting ligament? Ligaments are fibrous structures designed to prevent abnormal motion of a joint and connect bones to bones. Paul the apostle, writing to the church at Ephesus, describes the office bearers, the apostolic gifted individuals, the prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers as gifts from the Lord. These ministers help structure the various house churches and congregations and bring unity to the body, training and equipping the individuals in the different churches to build up one another in the faith: "...the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and **builds itself up** in love, as **each part does its work** (Ephesians 4:16 Emphasis mine). The body of Christ is to do the work of the ministry, while the gifted individuals are to train and support by modeling and teaching.

When Chairman Mao of the Communist Party came to power in China in 1949, he executed many Church leaders, kicked out all foreign church leaders, and closed down all churches. He thought this would shut down Christianity. Instead, the church multiplied and grew exponentially. In 1949, when the Communists took over under Chairman Mao, most mission experts agreed that there

were 750,000 Christians in China. Today, the best estimates of the size of the church are over 100 million people, with the population of China at 1,400 million. Some experts say that there are approximately 20,000 Chinese coming to Christ every day.

What do you think the Holy Spirit used to bring explosive growth to the church in China? What would happen if the Holy Spirit were to do the same in the church in the West?

The persecution caused the ministry to be done by non-professionals. Many relatively untrained people had to depend on the Spirit instead of their intellect, and many beautiful signs and wonders happened in the Chinese church that multiplied the church. We tend to rely on our intellect and learning in the Western church, but the Lord significantly used those with simple faith in God and a willing heart to grow the church in China. Out of necessity, believers were forced to trust God and step out in faith.

In the book, *The Coming Chinese Church*, written by Paul Golf and Pastor Lee, there is recorded a conversation between a house church leader and a high-up official in the Chinese government charged with hindering the growth of the Christian Church in China:

One day the PSB [Public Security Bureau] found me in a region where we had seen high levels of growth within the Chinese Gospel Fellowship. They brought me in for a meeting and asked if I would explain why the church was growing so fast in their area. My reply was pretty tongue-in-cheek: "Really, we owe it all to you guys! Look at it like this: Over these last ten years, your persecution of the church has failed to destroy it. On the contrary, we moved from the countryside to the villages when you began to oppose us. We ended up in the towns when you came against us in the villages. We spread through the whole province when you persecuted us in the towns. If you keep persecuting us, we will even get into the provincial capital city sooner or later. If you persecute us there, there is nowhere to go except home to heaven! Our job will be finished!"²

The Lord has used untrained ordinary people like you and me in China. He is not looking for super-saints. When Jesus walked this Earth, Christ didn't go to the Yeshivas (Seminaries) of Israel to find super-saints. He went to familiar places and called upon ordinary people like us. The calling of ordinary people is what baffled the religious professionals in the days when the Book of Acts was written: **"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus"** (Acts 4:13). This is what glorifies the Father that Christ can make us into fishers of men if we will come to Him and without reservation ask Him to use us. The qualities Christ is looking for in building His body, the Church of the Living God, is **F.A.T.** people, an acronym for:

- 1. Flexible**
- 2. Available**
- 3. Teachable**

1) Flexible: When Jesus walked this earth, many people had a heavy job of trying to keep 613

² Paul Golf with Pastor Lee, *The Coming Chinese Church*, Published by Monarch Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. Page 44-45.

religious' rules, with many other regulations added by the Pharisees. The Lord found men who were flexible with their time and could be taught the heart of the Father for His people. Jesus brought very different teaching, challenging the religious thinking of the day. Being flexible means you are not bound to predisposed ideas but are open to seeing people as Christ sees them. The opposite of being flexible is being stiff. Stiff-necked people in the Scriptures were stubborn people. Therefore, to be flexible is to be tender and open to the Holy Spirit with an attitude of humility. In the Scriptures, Jesus did not relate to every person in the same way but brought whatever truth the Father gave Him for that particular situation. We can do the same by looking to the Father in every case we encounter.

2) Available: The Bible says that if we are “willing and obedient, we will eat the good things of the land” (Isaiah 1:19). He is looking for people in this day and at this time, men and women without reservation, those that will rise to the sound of the trumpet call to put on their spiritual weapons and fight the good fight of faith. We have had too little of God in the past. The enemy has deceived us into believing that God's arm is too short to use people like us. Many of us have been sold “just three dollars' worth” of God:

I would like to buy 3 US dollars' worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me...pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy 3 US dollars' worth of God, please.³

We can say, "I'm not a great man or woman of God," but we are only called to be men or women of a great God. He can take us into the land! “Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power” (Psalm 110:3). Rise, brothers and sisters! Don't be satisfied with anything less than all Christ has won for you! The time to rest is the other side of eternity! The fields are ripe for harvesting, but the laborers are few (John 4:35). Being available to God is acting in simple obedience when you sense that the Holy Spirit wants to use you in some way. You may not feel adequate, but it is about His will and work, not your ability. If we are available and flexible, we can trust Him to give us wisdom and provide what we need to give to others. It is His work.

3) Teachable: Let us settle once and for all that God has the last word. When we are ready to learn, He will not leave us alone. He tells us that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. In the Old Testament, we read about the time of the Judges, which was a dark time in the history of God's people, Israel. We repeatedly learned what the people were like in those days, that “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). We are living in times like that again today. The idea of moral absolutes, right and wrong, is seen by many as old-fashioned. If we are serious students of the Word of God and faithful disciples, we must look to the Scriptures as our living guidelines. When we lack understanding, we must be willing to look to the Lord for wisdom. “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:6). The disciples did not always understand Jesus. He expressed His frustration when they were slow to learn, but they chose to follow Him even when they did not understand. After a particularly hard lesson, many of Jesus' disciples turned away from following Him. Jesus said to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the

³ Wilbur Rees, “\$3.00 Worth of God.”

words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

An old legend takes us back in time and recounts the time when Jesus ascended back into heaven after He had died on the cross and rose from the dead. According to the legend, the angel Gabriel met Him. Gabriel frowned when he saw the marks of Jesus' scars of His tortuous years on earth, especially the scars of His crucifixion. Gabriel said, "Master, you suffered terribly for those down on earth." "Yes, I did," was Jesus' reply. Gabriel continued, "Do they all know now about your life and forgiveness? Have they all heard about your death and resurrection?" "No, not yet," said Jesus. "Right now, only a handful of people in Palestine know about my death and resurrection."

Gabriel looked perplexed. "Then," he asked, "Well... How will everyone learn about your wonderful life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection?" "I have asked Peter, James, John, and a handful of friends and followers to tell others about it. And when other people hear and believe, they, in turn, will tell others. And Gabriel, by and by, the planet earth will hear the message." Still frowning, the angel responded, "But, hmmm, you know how people are on earth. What if they... What if Peter, James, and John get tired? What if they tell the story, and the next generation gets involved in other pursuits? What if, way down in the 18th or 21st century, people aren't committed any longer to your commission? Have you made other plans?" The Lamb of God looked directly at the angel of God and said, "I have no other plan. I am counting on them" (Author Unknown). He is counting on all of the body of Christ to serve and share the gospel's message.

Prayer: Father, we ask that all those who are believers will see that each of us is called to reach beyond ourselves to those that are without Christ. Grant us the power to live for You and testify to all You have done. Please help us to be flexible, available, and teachable. Amen!

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