

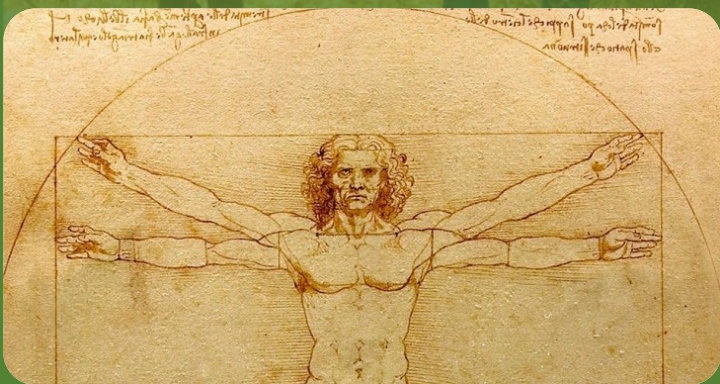
Like a Mighty Army

by Daniel Goering

Christ's Church as



FAMILY



BODY



ARMY

Like a Mighty Army

By Daniel Goering

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***"Like a mighty army
Moves the church of God
Brothers we are treading
Where the saints have trod"***

From a Christian hymn

Acknowledgements:

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The original author has graciously given me permission to pass this material along and for that I offer sincere thanks and appreciation.

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... are we committed to work through a church that has a mindset to be all God intended a church to be, to obey all He commanded?"

Why The Church?

The Christian world today is teeming with organizations: clubs, societies, mission organizations, training organizations, colleges, seminaries, ministries, and programs. Many of these are quite effective and very much alive. I have been challenged and encouraged by a number of them. Confronted with such a multitude and diversity of organizations, we Christians face a serious question of where to commit our resources. We do not have unlimited time, energy or money. Which one(s) will be the recipient(s) of our resources? What type of organization should we choose to invest our lives in?

My desire and burden are that we make a higher priority of channeling our time and resources to rediscovering the importance of the local church. This booklet is an attempt to help the restoration process in two areas. First, we must restore the local church to its proper position in the minds of Christians as the primary Christ-instituted organization. Second, our local churches must freshly understand and pursue the biblical pattern. Accordingly, these pages focus on two questions.

One: why the church? Why work through the church? Why be committed to the church? And two: what does a properly functioning church look like? What is the

biblical pattern for the church?

It would appear that the church already has a tremendous amount of help and that we have no lack of Christian organizations to get the work of God done. Then why the church? Why should we invest the primary focus of our resources on only one of the many types of organizations? I would like to suggest two reasons why we must be first and foremost committed to the local church.

First, because it is what Christ is committed to. I recognize this reasoning may seem shallow and unsatisfying to some. Its simplicity does not discount it. As Christians we confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We must remember that Christ gave birth to the church and that it is central to God's plans (Ephesians 3:8-10). If He is the Master and we are His disciples, how could we justify giving tremendous attention to the support and success of our own institutions while neglecting the one He instituted? Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me" (Matthew 28:18). Surely, we have some responsibility to respond to His authority in our relationship to Christian organizations. In a word, we should be committed to the church because Christ is committed to the church. It should be primary in our thinking because it is primary in His thinking. Our local churches should follow a biblical pattern, because a biblical pattern is His pattern.

Second, we must restore the church because it is the best unit available for reaching people with good news of life in Christ and for building them to maturity in Christ. It is not simply a good one or one of the best - it is the best. I want you to understand from the

beginning what I am not saying. The goal is not to have a perfect church. In the past, I've been associated with groups of people whose goal was perfecting the "New Testament" church. That is not what I am saying.

I believe one of the major goals of the Christian life is to reach people for Christ and help them grow in Christ. There are other goals in the Christian life, but certainly this is a central one. We should each have as one of our life-goals to motivate and train as many people as possible to follow Jesus Christ completely (Colossians 1:28-29). To reach this goal we want to find the best unit available, the best vehicle to reach the goal. The point is reaching and helping people. I believe that the New Testament shows us that the church is the best unit available to reach that goal of helping people.

Before expanding this thought, I should pause to clarify what I mean by the term "church." I could say that the "Church" is simply all the Christians. That would be true, in the universal sense, but it doesn't help very much. All I would really be saying is that God is going to use Christians to reach people. That is pretty obvious. Normally when we use the term "church" we mean particular groups of Christians, local churches. What I mean by the term "church" in this booklet is a properly functioning local church, a church that is successfully following God's instructions. It is good to note that not every group with the word "church" in its label is a properly functioning church. In fact, there is some difference of opinion as to what a properly functioning church should look like. That is something we will explore as

we progress. What I am suggesting is that a properly functioning local church is really the best unit for proclaiming the gospel and helping people grow as Christians.

There are many reasons for this, but I will suggest several that are significant. The first reason may seem too simple to you. When someone suggested this idea to me, I thought he was playing games with me, but I think it is worth some reflection.

(1) The church is the kind of group that was initiated by Christ and the apostles. Jesus established the church, and by the Holy Spirit through His apostles. He laid its foundation and gave much instruction for its proper function. It is significant to think not only about what Jesus did, but about what He did not do. He was God-in-flesh, all-knowing, all-wise. He could have chosen to set up any kind of organization. He could have created a whole structure of different kinds of Christian groups, clubs, and societies that would all work together to accomplish God's purposes. (I realize here I am arguing from silence, but I believe this is valid because it was indeed within His power to initiate anything He wanted.) And what did He do? He started one little group, one type of gathering we call the church. At that time, of course, it would never have occurred to us that He was initiating one particular kind of group. But today when we look across the spectrum of Christian organizations, we see an incredible diversity of groups. And only one kind, the church, can say it was personally initiated by Christ. It seems reasonable to say He could have initiated different kinds of groups or more than one kind group. He did not.

(2) The church Christ started was very successful in the first century. In the face of great opposition, the church swept across the Roman Empire in just 30 years. For any ideology to travel that far that fast is absolutely unparalleled in ancient history. It actually accomplished the goal! But isn't it intriguing that with all our organizations and societies we seem unable to match its effectiveness? Isn't it encouraging that there is one kind of Christian group initiated by Christ, and in its purity, it was amazingly successful?

(3) The church was not only initiated by Christ, but is also the only group for which we have God-given instructions. Someone might say, "Wait a minute, can't we take those same instructions and apply them to other types of groups?" Of course we can. Any Christian organization that is effective undoubtedly has done so. But if we apply all of God's instruction for the church to a training organization, for example, then for all intents and purposes it would be a church. A number of Christian groups that do not consider themselves churches are extremely effective and I sincerely thank God for them. One of the reasons they are effective is that they are applying part of God's instruction for the church - often applying it much better than many local churches do. If they take all that instruction and apply it, then essentially, they are a church, in fact if not in name.

Notice that if they take only part of that instruction and leave the rest, they will, almost certainly, supply something man-made in its place. Examples abound. The Christian world trains spiritual leaders much the same as the world around us trains leaders in

business or government. The financial and fund-raising policies of many Christian organizations look more like a corporation or a charitable organization than the local church.

For example, many Christian organizations have borrowed the fund-raising policies of some charitable organizations and brought discredit on the name of Christ by their pleas for help. Some training organizations have an elitist approach that excludes people from the program. Valuable people (who would have been welcomed into the church) have been lost for God's purposes because they did not meet the requirements of an organization.

(4) The church enables us to train people in the way Jesus did. We can't digress here too much into an analysis of Christ's training methods. But in a nutshell, Jesus trained individuals and small groups in real-life situations. A properly functioning church will allow us to train people in just the same way. This is especially true in the area of leadership training. There is a tremendous need for leaders in the Christian world today. Part of the problem may be that we are trying to train Christian leaders the same way we would train engineers or biology teachers, and it doesn't work. Four years of college may produce an engineer, but it is not a good way to train a Christian leader. Becoming an engineer is primarily a matter of knowledge coupled with some natural ability. It can be taught successfully in a classroom.

By contrast, spiritual leadership is primarily a matter of character, desire, and maturity. These qualities must be learned in the context of everyday life with its

pressures, conflicts and responsibilities. They will never be learned in a classroom. If leadership is simply the acquisition of knowledge, the classroom is sufficient. But if we would train leaders as Christ did, we are forced back to the church as the institution which enables us to train as He did.

(5) The church is the only type of group that allows us to pool all the different facets of the Christian life under one roof. Training, worship, Bible study, ministry, relationships and living situations can all be brought together within one group. This is much more than a matter of efficiency. When the individual Christian's life is fragmented, receiving training from one group, ministering with another group and perhaps worshipping with a third, he unwittingly avoids some learning situations God wants to use to produce maturity and strength of character. For example, let us suppose Joe Christian attends church on Sunday and receives strong, clear instruction in the area of relationships—how we ought to serve one another and submit to one another, how to handle conflict, the imperative of honesty and openness, etc., but his ministry is through some other group. Those with whom he works in the ministry have not heard the fresh reminder he has just heard about relationships. As Joe shares in the ministry day by day with these other Christians, he is missing out on a tremendous learning opportunity. No one in particular will hold Joe accountable to obey what he has learned. In contrast, if he serves and worships and studies and trains with one group of people in a local church, and they all receive that same instruction concerning relationships, the heat is on. Encouragement to obey, to apply truth in daily living, is built into the situation.

When we as individuals are involved in so many different groups and places, God may never effectively put His finger on areas of our lives that He needs to touch. Unwittingly, we subvert what He wants to do.

Some Unhelpful Responses to the Church.

Enough for reasons; I am saying that the local church is the best unit available for reaching out to non-Christians and building Christians. We may discuss this for pages and pages, and make it all seem very logical and very biblical. But in the back of the mind is a nagging hesitation. When we look at the local churches with which we have been involved, we just can't imagine that the church could be the primary organization for the accomplishment of God's purposes. It hardly seems God ever intended it to be. We recall all the dynamic Christians and dynamic Christian groups we have encountered who were working outside of the local church. Then we think about all the dead churches we have attended and all the people who have come into those churches excited about their new life in Christ, only to wither on the vine. And we think, "My goodness, that can't possibly be what God expects us to do today."

What I wish to examine are two unhelpful responses that well-meaning Christians sometimes have to this situation. Many of us see the church today and say, "Man alive! It's sick. It's in trouble. It's not doing the job. It may be biblical. It may be the only kind of group you see in the New Testament. It may be the only group initiated by Christ. But it's just not getting the work of God done." So, what do we do? We develop

an organization that will help it out, an organization to supplement or assist it. This is a well-intentioned and increasingly common response. In the short run it has some positive effects. But like a band-aid applied where stitches were needed, ultimately it is an unhelpful response to the real needs of the church.

The Christian world is full of organizations, or "arms," of the church. Someone feels the church is missing the mark in outreach, and so he starts an evangelistic organization, an evangelistic arm of the church. Someone else sees a need for more practical training in Christian living. "We need a sharp training organization to supplement what's offered by the church," he says. And so we have another arm out there. Others see needs in foreign missions and theological training. More organizations are the answer. Now we are combining organizations to produce new hybrids, a training organization with an emphasis on evangelism, a seminary with an emphasis on practical training. Organizations multiply with no end in sight. When anyone has a new idea or sees a major need, the reflex response is to start another organization.

I do not wish to be a dogmatist. My quarrel is not with "non-church" organizations. Certainly, some organizations benefit churches and still others function under the umbrella of a particular local church. But many, many of these clubs, societies, and organizations are not helping the church. Certainly, that may be their initial, stated purpose. But in reality, many of these have actually begun to replace the church. This is a most unhealthy response for a very compelling reason. If we separate Christian groups

into two categories, churches and others, an interesting thing appears. The non-church groups feel no compulsion to obey all of God's instruction for the church. Why should they? By design they are not churches and never intended to be. If I were tactless and obnoxious, I might go to such and such an organization and say, "Listen, you people aren't following the biblical pattern for leadership (or government, or finances, or membership or discipline, etc.) in the church." They would reply, "When we set up this organization, we decided we would have a different approach to leadership, but that's all right for us because we aren't a church." When we turn to the local church, in many cases it may try to follow all God's instructions for the church. But it is hindered from functioning properly because some or all of its responsibilities are being given away. Almost everything that the church is trying to do is being duplicated by some other organization. The difficulty then is that, in general, there is no group that is really functioning the way God intended His groups to function. The churches are unable to function properly because they have given away their work and their responsibilities to other organizations. The "non-church" organization focusing on some aspect of training or outreach or whatever, feels no compulsion to follow all God instructions for the church.

The helpful response would be to direct our energy and attention toward restoring the church. We need to figure out how to get this practical training back into the church. How can we get theological training or leadership training back into the church? How can we make the church a vital unit in evangelism? How can we make the church alive and functioning the way it is

supposed to function? I will attempt a response to this issue as we progress, but first, a second unhelpful response.

The second unhelpful response is simply a surface loyalty to the church. The person with this type of loyalty may ignore the New Testament vision of what a church ought to be, but he will maintain some kind of involvement with a group that calls itself a church. "After all," he will say, "it's in the Bible, and you really ought to go to church." His real commitment may be to some other type of organization, but superficially he is committed to "the church" simply because he attends a weekly meeting that has the proper label and follows the proper forms. If the true loyalty, the genuine commitment, the deep relationships, the positive experiences in evangelism, the real training all happen outside the church, Christians have nothing left to give the church. It will not do to say that I am giving my life to this club or society but, oh yes, I need to be loyal to the church. That will not do. It is surface loyalty.

Surface loyalty to a group labeled "church" is just playing with semantics. When the New Testament writers used the word "church," it was an ordinary term, not a religious one. When they gave instruction to the church, it was simply instruction to Christian groups. The helpful response is not some kind of superficial loyalty based on word-games, but a loyalty to God's Word. It does not matter that we are loyal to some group that has the word "church" in its label; what matters is that we are loyal to God's instruction, all God's instruction, for His groups. Our commitment should be to dig into that instruction, to find out what

it is saying, and then to make sure we are with a group that is doing all it can to follow that instruction and to give all we have to help the group do that.

Once again, why the church? Why return to the local church as the unit we will work through to accomplish God's purposes? A return to the church is simply based on the confidence that God's plans are better than ours and that those plans are revealed in His Word. Of course, no one fully grasps all God's plans for the church, and certainly no church is perfect. The question is this: are we committed to working through a church that has a mindset to be all God intended a church to be, to obey all He commanded?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is the church the best unit available for communicating God's truth to people and then building them to maturity in Christ?
2. Why might it be dangerous for an organization to adopt only some of God's instructions for Christian bodies?
3. How do we automatically push ourselves toward man-made policies and plans when we set up a "non-church" Christian organization?
4. We can't train leaders for the Christian world in a four-year school situation. Instead, we should go back to the local churches and emulate Christ's methods. Explain why this is better.
5. What are the advantages of gathering all the different facets of Christian life under "one roof" (i.e., training, worship, Bible study, social outreach, relationships, etc.)?
6. Why does it seem so impossible for a church (as opposed to a para-church organization) to be full of dynamic people doing a dynamic work?
7. Explain why some people have only surface loyalty to the church. How is this an unhelpful response or even harmful to the local church?

8. Comment on the observation that a major weakness of non-church groups is that they possess no compulsion to obey all of God's instruction for the church.

9. How would you describe the New Testament vision for what the church ought to be?

"Any person attempting to restore the New Testament pattern for the church must at least pause to examine the goal or purpose of the church."

Restoring the Pattern

Restoring local churches to the pattern of the New Testament is a tall order, and I wish to clarify two things from the outset. One, these few pages cannot begin to be exhaustive. My purpose is not an exhaustive examination of all God's instruction for the proper functioning of a local church. Instead, I hope to explore several areas of instruction which must be experienced as practical realities by local churches if we are to restore the biblical pattern. These are areas of instruction which we have neglected, perhaps because obedience in them is costly. Two, I do not pretend to have a corner on the truth-market for the church. Much that is valuable in this area has already been written by others. No doubt some of God's people understand whole areas of instruction which are beyond my grasp or experience. I do not believe I have a corner on the truth. But what I wish to share has been my practical, daily experience for many years now, both in the U.S. and in Europe. I am convinced that these simple truths embraced as practical realities for the local church will transform our lives and our churches.

Any person attempting to restore the New Testament pattern for the church must at least pause to examine the goal or purpose of the church. How can any

church function if its goal is unclear? To clearly state the goal of the church is not easy. It is an area of truth with many right answers.

The New Testament talks a great deal about "the church," the universal body of all true believers, and also about particular churches or local groups of Christians. In examining the goal of the church, I will make no effort to distinguish between the two because I believe a local church is (or ought to be) a miniature of the church universal. A particular church is simply a local expression of the larger universal body. All it is and does should accurately portray the truths of the one church.

What is the church's purpose or goal? Why is it here? Where is it going? God clearly tells us the church's reason for being: it is to glorify Him (Ephesians 3:10,21). The ultimate test for the individual or the church is, "Did God receive the glory, the most possible glory?" God wants glory from the church. And how will He receive it? How can we know our particular church is giving God the greatest possible glory?

Ephesians 1 tells us the church is Christ's body on the earth, "the fullness of Him who fills all in all." I believe this has at least two implications for the purpose of the church. As Christ's body, the church is Christ's representative and His agent. As His representative the church is here in His place, doing and being what He would do and be if He were here. As His representative the church must accurately reflect Christ's character and glory. This is what Paul told the Corinthians: "We all with unveiled face are reflecting

as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" (2. Corinthians 3:18). (Most translations say "beholding." Actually, the word is "mirroring" or "reflecting as in a mirror.") Just as Moses' glowing face reflected God's glory, so we are to reflect Christ's glory with unveiled face. Representing Christ, reflecting His character, demands that we visit widows and orphans in their distress, expose and oppose unrighteousness in our society, and live our life as the servant of all. We should respect and honor all men, love the unlovely, and turn the other cheek. By reflecting Christ's character of justice and compassion, we become the salt of the earth, "shining as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Philippians 2:15).

As Christ's agent, the church is the unit or vehicle Christ wants to use to accomplish His purpose. Just as my body is the agent, I use to carry out my will in life, so the church is His body and the instrument of His will. The Bible is clear that His will, His desire, is "that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1. Timothy 2:4). This has been God's purpose throughout history and can be discovered in the Law, the Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation. This purpose of God is easily divided into two parts: (1) reaching those who are alienated from God with the message of forgiveness and life in Christ (Mark 16:15); and (2) helping those who respond to grow to maturity in Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). Simply stated it is reaching and building people. This was the apostle Paul's purpose in life: "We proclaim Christ! We warn everyone we meet, and we teach everyone we can ... that we may bring every man up to his full maturity in

Christ Jesus" (Colossians 1:28-29, Phillips). No doubt he had embraced the very purpose of God.

We observe in history that as the first apostles evangelized, they also planted churches. When people responded to the Gospel, the apostles banded them together in little groups or churches and by the Spirit gave God's instructions for the proper functioning of those groups. It seems obvious that the apostles grouped new believers into churches to provide an environment for healthy spiritual growth. References to this in the New Testament abound (Ephesians 4:14-16). By bringing the Christians together in churches, they both protected and multiplied the new life.

As Christ's agent in the world, the church is to communicate life in Christ and then provide an environment to nurture Christian growth. The church is to make disciples and then train those disciples to follow all Jesus commanded.

In summary, the purpose of the church is to give God the most possible glory through reaching and building people. Recognizing that the church is Christ's body helps translate this purpose into more specific goals. As Christ's representative the church should accurately reflect His character and glory in the world. This gives God glory. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). When men see Christ's character in us, they glorify God. As Christ's agent the church should fulfill God's purpose of reaching all people with

the gospel and building as many as possible to maturity in Christ.

This also gives God glory. Paul said the gospel spreading to more and more people resulted in thanksgiving abounding to God's glory (2. Corinthians 4:15). The apostle Paul pulls all these ideas together for us in 1. Corinthians. Beginning in 10:31, he tells us to glorify God in everything. He then explains that like him, we can give God glory by pleasing "all men in all things," not living for ourselves, but for others. The point of this sacrifice for others is their salvation. We give God glory by reaching men. He concludes with, "Be imitators of me as I also am of Christ." By living for others and not for ourselves, we are reflecting the character of Christ. By sacrificing our lives to reach all men with the gospel, we are fulfilling God's purpose.

What should a properly functioning church look like? Exactly what is the biblical pattern? As I mentioned, this booklet is not exhaustive. But there are three areas I would like you to consider with me. Keep in mind that each of these should be a practical reality in the local church - not just a theory or creedal statement. I have said the church is the best unit available for reaching people with the good news and building them up in Christ. This is only true if it is a properly functioning church. I have said the purpose of the church is to glorify God. A properly functioning church, a church that prioritizes keeping all of God's instruction for the church, will best satisfy that purpose.

Discussion Questions:

1. How should the universal church be reflected in the local church?
2. What is the difference, if any, between the need to free men from social injustice and the need to free men from sin? How are these needs related? How should a local church address these needs?
3. What is the central purpose of the church? Why is this so important? How does it affect the goals, activities, and structures of the church?
4. How does the church, as Christ's representative, accurately reflect His character and glory in the world?
5. How does reaching people with the Gospel give glory to God?

***"... the church as revealed to us
in the New Testament is like a family
in the nature and depth of relationships."***

The Properly Functioning Church: A Family

A church should look like a family. In the New Testament the church is called the household or family of God (Ephesians 2:19; 1. Timothy 3:15). Spiritual leaders are referred to as fathers, and churches are called children (1. Corinthians 4:14-15). Paul tells Timothy that relationships in the church should look like family relationships. "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1. Timothy 5:1-2). He describes his relationship with the Thessalonians in family terms. "We proved to be gentle among you as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children ... exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children" (1. Thessalonians 2:7-11). The principle is that every Christian has been born into the family of God and that in some way the church should be like a family.

How does this become practical? Does it only mean that we call one another brother and sister rather than Mr. and Mrs.? It strikes me that the church as revealed to us in the New Testament was like a family in the nature and depth of their relationships. A family is

characterized by genuine commitment. We say that blood is thicker than water. In the same way the local church, if it is to function properly, must be characterized by genuine commitment. The biblical term often used here is fellowship. Of course, fellowship simply means a sharing in common. Many of us grew up thinking fellowship was sharing warm Kool-aid and chocolate chip cookies in the church basement. It is infinitely more than that. In the early church, fellowship meant sharing Christ in common, and more practically, fellowship meant that the Christians shared their lives with one another. As we read the early pages of the Acts, the vitality, the life, the unity and sacrifice, and the commitment is astonishing. It is no wonder that "everyone kept feeling a sense of awe" (Acts 2:43).

Where is the awe today, among the Christians or the watching world? It is largely missing for a number of reasons. One reason is our shallow commitment to one another. There is almost no comparison between the shallow commitment so typical today and the amazing depth of commitment we see in the pages of the New Testament. In God's Word we see a church where fellowship was real; commitment was genuine. It was truly like a family in the best possible sense.

To get specific and practical in this area, I am going to suggest some things that may seem extreme. Someone has said, "We've been subnormal for so long, when we see someone who is normal, we think he's abnormal." This is the case with fellowship in the church. We have been subnormal for so long. We think it normal that we know the names of only a few of our brothers in Christ and almost none of their

needs or struggles. Getting practical may be a shock to the system. But keep in mind that a visit to the early church would involve a similar kind of shock and not because of the lack of modern technology.

If deep fellowship is to be a practical reality, we must have long-term commitments to one another. Of course, in a large church no one can have a close relationship with every other member, but among the members of a properly functioning church there must be long-term commitments to one another. In many churches the turnover rate is amazingly rapid, and it is viewed as normal. For many of us, commitment to a particular local church is one of the lowest priorities in life. We do not take the time for genuine fellowship because, "who knows, I may be gone this time next year." A practical application of long-term commitment is placing a higher priority on my relationships in the church than I do on my job or career. This may seem extreme, but remember the standard of the early church.

Typically, today, we Christians allow many things to take priority over our commitment to the church and to individuals within the church. We move across the country for education, career advancement, better pay, even better climate. We tell ourselves we will look for a good church when we arrive. Even church leaders do the same, moving here and there for better pay or a better position. Reflect for a moment on the attitude this creates in any given local church. The members arrive at meetings week by week to partake of a service made available by such-and-such church. When opportunity calls, they move on. There is no expectation of deep fellowship with other members.

The atmosphere created by such shallow commitment is deadly to any depth of fellowship. This kind of church is not a family, but a foster home at best, perhaps only an orphanage. It is difficult to believe this shallowness is God's plan for the church.

Several years ago, I moved hundreds of miles across two states in the Midwest of the U.S. The purpose of the move was to plant a church, to begin a new work for God in a new place. When I moved, I left behind a number of close friends in the sending church. These were people who had made great sacrifices to care for me and our team. Leaving them was heart-wrenching. But there were others who moved with me. One was a husband and father who worked as a painting contractor. He left his business and his parents who lived close by and moved his family hundreds of miles away because we were committed to one another and to God. Another family man made the same move, leaving behind in-laws, friends, and a position at the university. Both of these men had to trust God for new employment. Both uprooted their families. It seemed a bit radical, but it was the logical result of the genuine commitment in our relationships.

The example is a small one, but imagine the spiritual climate this kind of commitment produces. In this atmosphere the church seems like a family, relationships flourish, fellowship is real, and we find it natural to genuinely share our lives with one another.

If deep fellowship is to be a practical reality, we must have long-term commitments to one another. We also must have daily fellowship. In the first part of Acts, the

Christians were together day by day. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to encourage one another day after day" (Hebrews 3:13). If the church is to be like a family, characterized by genuine commitment, there must be some avenue by which Christians devoted to one another can offer daily encouragement and warning - encouragement in righteousness, and warning when someone strays. This simple practice is of incredible value in providing an environment for Christian growth. Notice in Hebrews the writer's concern is that some through unbelief will fall away. What is his remedy? Prayer and fasting? Devotion to God's word? A stiff challenge to make Christ Lord? No, his remedy is a simple encouragement to meaningful, daily fellowship. If we wish to produce Christians who reflect Christ's character and follow His commands, daily fellowship is essential.

Once again, this is so different from the norm. To make daily fellowship a practical reality may require a significant shift in priorities. It may affect the neighborhood we choose to live in. In one of our church plants in Germany we chose to make sacrifices to live within walking distance of each other. It allowed us to really have daily fellowship. This priority will also certainly affect our use of leisure time. But the benefits of daily encouragement in Christian living make it worth the sacrifice.

Finally, if genuine commitment and depth of fellowship are to be practical realities, the members of the body must be committed to caring for one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually. If this were truly happening, many of our churches would be excitingly different. The New Testament provides

gripping examples of Christians sacrificing to meet one another's physical needs. "And all those who believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:45). "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing" (2. Corinthians 8:2-4). Can you imagine the spiritual climate created by some selling possessions to meet the needs of others? It would be awesome. In fact, it IS awesome and I speak from personal experience!

This kind of care should be the norm in our churches. There should be no one in need unless everyone is in need. No one should be lacking the basic necessities of life. There should not be any who suffer need while some have the means to provide relief. Paul said, "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard-pressed, but that there might be equality" (2. Corinthians 8:13). Incomes vary greatly among Christians in a local church, but the care and commitment to one another should be the same regardless of income level. An examination of 2 Corinthians 8 reveals that this kind of commitment to caring for one another's financial needs finds its source in God's grace and is best exemplified by Christ Himself. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." (2. Corinthians 8:9). If the

purpose of the church is to glorify God by reflecting the character of Christ, can we possibly hope to satisfy our purpose without imitating Christ's sacrifice for each of us?

There should also be a commitment to care for one another emotionally. The Christians ought to love one another, and we should be able to sense this love when we are with them. Relationships in the church should meet the deep needs we all have for love and companionship. Our closest ties should be with others in the church, not with the guy next door or someone at work. Our heart-level relationships should be in the church. "The congregation of those who believed were of one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32). That describes a properly functioning church - people of one heart and soul who love one another and are committed to one another.

This kind of caring requires that we view our relationships with other Christians as one of our highest priorities next to our relationship with God. Practically, this takes us back to daily fellowship. To care for one another emotionally takes time. I can't meet someone's needs if my only contact is a couple of hours on Sunday morning. In God's plan for the church, people should spend lots of time together, sharing meals together, sharing lives together. God wants us wrapped up in one another's lives. That is the way a family is. Family members are committed to one another, to taking care of each other and to spending time together. The closest relationships are there. That is what a church ought to look like.

Commitment to also care for one another spiritually is essential if we are to function as the family of God. This subject is as broad as the New Testament. I would like to make only one observation. We all need others who are committed to caring for us spiritually, taking responsibility for our character and our growth to maturity. We need people who love us enough to reprove sin and hold us accountable to obey all God has taught us. Often accountability to some other Christian is a key element in unloading a wrong behavior and replacing it with a godly one. It requires someone deeply committed to us to point out our flaws and hold us accountable to change. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6). God's plan is for the church to be characterized by those kinds of relationships.

A properly functioning church should look like a family. This means it will be characterized by genuine commitment. Fellowship in its deepest sense will be a practical reality. The individual members' commitment to the church and to each other will be a high priority. Because of their commitment they will be together often, caring for one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Only in this way can a church accurately reflect Christ's character and provide the best environment for spiritual growth.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the differences between the New Testament church and the church today. How can we restore the biblical pattern of fellowship and ministry?
2. Why is genuine commitment essential in the local church?
3. Describe the family pattern for the church. How are roles of leadership, service, etc., viewed in this pattern? Describe the importance of deep relationships to this model.
4. What will it take for our local churches to overcome the patterns of shallow commitment?
5. Examine the relational atmosphere of your church. Would it be described as a family, or an orphanage? Why?
6. Why is daily fellowship essential? How can it be realized in your setting?
- 7 Why in a local church, should no one be in need unless everyone is in need? Why are commitment and sacrifice essential to such a reality?

"If the local church is to work together like a body, we must have a vision for ministry by every member."

The Properly Functioning Church: A Body

A church should work together like a body. Romans 12 tells us, "just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others." The point is obvious. The church is like a body with many different parts all working together as a whole. It is diversity in unity. The subject of Romans 12 and 1. Corinthians 12 is spiritual gifts, but what they say about the church is more basic. Ephesians 4 gives us added information about the church as a "body whose growth depends on the proper working of each individual part."

The principle that the church should work together like the parts of a body is essential to answering the question of what a properly functioning church should look like. To restore the New Testament pattern, we must restore the truth that the church is a body. In an effort to do this, some have emphasized the need for each Christian to discover and develop his or her spiritual gift. This is certainly a step in the right direction. But too often it has resulted in specialization and diversity more than unity and working together. I

believe the principle is far more basic than spiritual gifts. If the local church is to work together like a body we must have a vision for an every-member ministry. I am not talking about a statement of faith that affirms the priesthood of the believer, but about an every member ministry as a practical reality in the local church. Every member should be equipped for and involved in the work of the ministry" (Ephesians 4:12).

Christianity has become a spectator sport. The majority participate in some minimal fashion while a small minority of "professionals" or "committed Christians" do the great majority of the work. God never intended His church to function in this way. His plan has always been that all Christians be full-time in their commitment to advance His kingdom and in the quality of their work in building His church. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" (1. Corinthians 12:21). And yet that is exactly what we are saying without the practical reality of an every-member ministry.

In Ephesians 4:11-16 we find a picture of the church as a body. Central to the passage is every-member ministry. Leaders are not there to do all the work, but to train the Christians to do the work. In verse 16 we see a web of relationships, each individual part ministering to all the others. It clearly states that this causes the growth of the body. The diversity of the body - different gifts, abilities and perspectives - is essential to producing maturity. No one, not even a leader, can give another Christian everything he needs. What I cannot give, someone else can. My weakness is someone else's strength. This is diversity in unity, and it produces healthy growth throughout the

church. If the church is to fulfill its purpose, it must provide an environment for spiritual growth. To do so it must work like a body.

A beginning place for developing an every-member ministry is to recognize that each member is valuable and essential to the work. This is a major point in 1. Corinthians 12. Paul explains that God has given essential tasks to unattractive parts of the body. We should let that sink in - essential, life-giving tasks are given to unattractive parts. If one member suffers, all suffer. It is not just that all ought to sympathize if one suffers. Rather, if one suffers, all really do suffer. Each one is valuable and essential. Each one has valuable tasks to perform. Each one has something unique to offer. If one suffers, all suffer. If one loses out, all lose out. We stand or fall together. Recognizing this across the board in the local church is a first step toward an every-member ministry.

It is also vital that each member be challenged to make Christ Lord, challenged to follow Christ completely. This challenge to discipleship should not be coercive or manipulative. Spiritual leaders should challenge by their lives and teaching, but never lord it over God's people. The very atmosphere and tone of the church should provide a constant challenge and encouragement to each member to make Christ Lord. Those who teach should not harangue the Christians; instead, the claims of Christ on our lives should be unfolded with the expectation that there is a God-given desire to follow Him. Above all, there must be leaders as well as average members, the rank-and-file, who demonstrate in their lives a total commitment to Christ.

The standard of discipleship has fallen. It is subtle, but we do not challenge all Christians to lordship because we do not believe every Christian should obey all Christ commanded. As someone so aptly suggested, "we must lower the bar for leadership, but raise the bar for discipleship". If we hope to restore the New Testament pattern for the church, one message that is desperately needed is that there is one standard for all Christians - one standard for all. Today there is a double standard in the church. We take what we think are the more difficult areas of obedience and assign them to the "professionals," the ministers and the missionaries, the Christian workers. It is the priest who takes the vow of poverty, the minister who accepts the lower living standard, while Christ said, "No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). It is not that this was the requirement for leadership. It was the bottom line for any follower of Christ.

Today it is the professional who is expected to pour out his life to reach others for Christ. Yet Jesus said, "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 shall save it" (Mark 8:34-35). Today, the minister is expected to take obedience seriously, while the average Christian need only concern himself with a few fundamentals (love your neighbor, be honest, etc.). And yet Jesus taught that the way to make a disciple is, "teach them to observe all I commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). If the standard for each and every follower of Christ is "observe all", what higher standard can there be? There is one standard for all,

and that standard is to obey all. We have robbed Christians of spiritual vitality by failing to challenge them to follow Christ completely. The sacrifice and commitment necessary for an every-member ministry are an impossibility unless Christians are challenged to make Christ Lord by observing all He commanded. To restore the biblical pattern, we must restore the biblical standard of discipleship.

At the heart of developing an every-member ministry is the task of equipping each one for the work of service and then involving him in that work. This is God's plan, "the equipping of the saints for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). That an every-member ministry is intended is obvious. The passage goes on to say the body "is fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies" and grows "according to the proper working of each individual part" (Ephesians 4:16). I believe that in the broadest sense "the work of service" is the work of building Christ's body by first reaching people with the gospel and then building them up. Without question it involves helping the church and its individual members grow to full maturity. What we must conclude is that the average church member is the one who should do the work of reaching people and helping his brothers grow up in Christ. Another way to say it is that virtually all Christians should be disciple-makers and, in that sense, spiritual leaders. Not only should our average member do this work; it is a work for which he is to be trained (fully prepared).

This presents quite a different picture of the church. The members do not just attend meetings to be fed

but to be equipped. They are to be trained to do the very essential work of caring for one another. The overlap here with church as a family should be obvious. In one sense each member becomes a minister being trained to do the work of service to build up the body to bring others to completion in Christ.

One tremendous benefit of an every-member ministry is that it gives real responsibility to people and through responsibility, challenges them and stimulates their growth. Responsibility gives them direction and purpose. Too often the story goes like this: young men and women become Christians, join the church, and at first, they were very much alive in Christ. They know they have been delivered from a hopeless, destructive way of life. But soon the life and excitement begin to fade. Why the loss of vitality? After they taught a Sunday school class and sang in the choir, there was nowhere to go, nothing to grow into, no new challenge. If we fail to equip people to share their new life and build others up, and then give them meaningful responsibility, they often wither on the vine and their growth is stunted.

It is not within the scope of this book to discuss how we train people to do the work. But it must be practical training. The responsibility to build in others must be real. The involvement in the work must be genuine. This cannot be some program added on to the real life of the church. It has to be at the heart of the church to be real. This means leaders must take a back seat to those in their care. They should equip the saints to do the work and then depend on them to do it. The church's programs and activities must give time as

well as make room for the members to actually do the work.

If we desire to see the church function as a body, a question arises as to the role and function of church leaders. Today we commonly train Christian leaders in much the same way we train leaders in business, science, or industry. First there is professional, university training. This is followed by initiation into a career which may progress through several different positions. Similarly, we take those in our churches who show leadership potential and send them off to Bible college and seminary, after which they are hired by some church to shepherd people they do not know. As their career blossoms the leader may move to bigger and better positions. One immediate difficulty with this approach is its effect on developing an every-member ministry. If we take those with the strongest desire to care for people and ship them out for training and subsequent employment by some other church, how will we ever develop an every-member ministry? It has been my observation that the traditional approach to developing church leadership saps the church of those with real desire for God and leaves the pastor behind with those who are unwilling to make that commitment. It deadens our churches because we are exporting all the "life".

By contrast, in the New Testament it seems that leaders were trained right in the local church. In Acts 11 we have two leaders in Antioch. By Acts 13 we have five. It does not appear that they imported them. They did not attend some training program in Jerusalem and then come up to Antioch. Paul and Barnabas trained them right there in the local church.

It also seems that in the New Testament a leader generated his own following. He was not hired to take care of strangers; he generated a following by being spiritually fruitful, and those people met his physical needs in exchange for his spiritual care. He was the natural spiritual authority in the Christians' lives. Had the church in Antioch come to the five leaders and said, "We'd like you to move on. We think we would like to hire someone else," the leaders would have had no idea what was meant. They were the leaders and they had generated the following through teaching and preaching. The idea that we can send a man to a Bible college over here for training and then plug him into a church somewhere else as the leader is foreign to the New Testament. What is more natural is that a leader generates his own following and then cares for those people and helps them grow to maturity in Christ. It is like saying it is normal for parents to generate their own family. That does not mean single parents cannot adopt children, but the norm is for parents to generate a family. When they do so their authority and responsibility is natural. They take care of their children until they are grown, live on their own, and repeat the process.

As we would expect, the biblical approach to leadership is consistent with an every-member ministry. When every Christian is equipped to care for people, many of them will generate a following within the church, and if trained properly, grow into spiritual leaders in their own right. The logical result, the natural result of an every-member ministry, is that some will grow up to leadership. This is what we find in the New Testament: leaders growing up within the church, coming from among the congregation. As it

says in Acts 20:28 - "Be on guard for yourselves, and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,". The absence of this perspective on every-member ministry and developing leaders has robbed the church of tremendous leadership resources. There is great untapped leadership potential in the members of our churches. Many with the desire and maturity (1. Timothy 3:1-7) to be leaders are pouring their lives into temporal pursuits because the traditional approach to leadership does not recognize or encourage them.

The prospect of men growing into leadership in the local church raises still another issue that cannot be neglected. The New Testament example is one of plural leadership in the local church. We are never instructed to have several leaders in a local church, but the example is overwhelming. Every time we read of local church leadership it is plural. (Notice that the terms "overseer," "elder," and "shepherd" all refer to the same position, not to a hierarchy of different classes of leadership. (Acts 20:17 + 28; Titus 1:5-7; I Peter 5:1-3 will bear this out.) Coupled with the example of the apostles, who always teamed with others, there is a strong case for plural leadership in the church. I believe the early church had a true plurality in leadership. They did not have the "teaching elder" and some others who helped out a bit, nor did they have the pastor flanked by a board of deacons or trustees. It was true plurality, with shared responsibility for the church and the necessity of decision making on the basis of unity. Acts 15, especially verse 25, is a good example of just such a decision-making process.

For those of us accustomed to a different approach, plural leadership can sound difficult, inefficient, and cumbersome. But consider the benefits, (1) It makes quality care for the whole flock a realistic possibility. The leaders can personally, directly care for more people. (2) It brings diversity into the leadership. In decision making and in ministering to the church, the diversity of three or four leaders is healthy and practical. (3) It protects the leaders and the church from being led into error by one man. A leader's first responsibility is to be on guard for his fellow leaders (Acts 20:28). (4) It protects leaders from physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion. It becomes realistic for a leader to spend the kind of time necessary to maintain a growing relationship with God. (5) It protects leaders' families. The common approach puts church leaders in an impossible situation. Often church leaders find they must choose between family and church. Faced with the choice, the family often loses because we think the needs at home are less pressing. "My wife's not going to leave me this week. My kids aren't going to grow up today." So the family gets put on the shelf while we care for the church. That is a wrong choice, coming out of a situation we should not be in. With plural leadership leaders are able to pass the responsibility to someone else and meet that pressing need at home. (6) Finally, plural leadership allows men to grow up to responsibility in the church. It makes room for others. Men will not stagnate in their growth because there is something to grow into. The possibilities for God-given responsibility are limitless. Certainly, there is a limit to the number of leaders that can function together effectively. The early church seems to have

solved this by using this strength in leadership to expand into new areas.

What then is the role of leaders in a local church?

They are to determine the direction of the church and to lead by example. They are available as a resource in decision-making. They are to work hard at teaching and preaching. They are to shepherd, meeting the needs of those in their care. They are to be on guard, alert to spiritual danger. And they are to equip and train the saints for the work of building in lives. It strikes me that one goal of spiritual leaders should be to eliminate the gap between themselves and those being led. Rather than trying to maintain some position above the Christians, a true spiritual leader will give practical help to bring others to full maturity in Christ. As he does so, these mature ones will become leaders themselves.

The subject of spiritual leadership is broad. I have only touched on a few areas and no doubt have left some questions unanswered. The point is this: (1) restoring the New Testament pattern for the church will also require a biblical pattern for leadership, (2) and a biblical pattern for leadership creates a situation conducive to an every-member ministry.

To accomplish its purpose of glorifying God, the church must have an every-member ministry for three reasons. One, developing the diversity inherent within the church is an important aspect of reflecting Christ's character. No one of us can fully reflect His character and glory. It requires the diversity of a body. Two, if we are to reach the most possible for Christ, it is

essential to equip and train as many Christians as possible to do the work of reaching others. Three, if we are to build men and women to completion in Christ, it requires an increasing number of Christians who are equipped to do the work of service, each providing his unique ministry. The diversity of the body is essential to providing an environment for such growth. It is an essential part of producing mature Christians.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the distinguishing features of the church as a body. In what practical ways are the members to be "knit together"?
2. What is more basic to the life of the church than the recognition of spiritual gifts? What is the difference between having a spiritual gift and having an individual ministry?
3. Describe how the Christian faith has become a "spectator sport."
4. How does the church today often seem to promote different standards for different members and positions within the church? What is the universal standard for all? In what ways is the failure to challenge and call to the same standard a "robbery"?
5. Discuss some of the benefits of giving responsibility to all church members.
6. What is the failure of traditional church leadership? How does it help induce a type of class distinction within the church? How can leadership "naturally" arise out of the local congregation?

"Viewed as an army, the church does not exist for its own sake... It has as its objective to fulfill Christ's commission of discipling all nations."

The Properly Functioning Church: An Army

The church is a family characterized by genuine commitment. It is a body with each member playing its part. And finally, the church is like an army. Paul told the Ephesians and Thessalonians to put on the armor of God to prepare for spiritual conflict with the forces of darkness. To the Corinthians, his life was spiritual warfare engaged with divinely powerful weapons. Timothy is challenged to, "Suffer hardship with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2. Timothy 2:3-4). The reality of spiritual conflict is prevalent throughout the New Testament. Opponents are disarmed and victories won. There are casualties in battle. At the end of his life, Paul had fought the good fight.

The purpose of an army may be defense, but it also may be conquest. The church as the army of God is a conquering army, advancing God's kingdom in the enemy territory of a fallen world. Man was originally given the enjoyable task of ruling a creation untouched by sin. God designed man for greatness. When He created man, He made a grand creature who could rule His new creation. God made us with the capacity and potential for world dominion. But when man fell, world dominion was lost to Satan, and

will not be restored until the return of Christ (1. John 5:19). In the interim God has given us a new destiny. Like the original one, this destiny involves world dominion. We are to advance God's kingdom in a fallen world. We are engaged in spiritual battle against Satan, the usurper, a battle to deliver men from Satan's dominion into the kingdom of God (Acts 26:18). As the army of God, the church's objective is nothing short of world conquest.

The challenge to world conquest was clearly laid out by Christ Himself, not once, but at least three times in the Great Commission. In harmonizing the resurrection accounts, it would seem that every time Jesus addressed a group of His followers in the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, He charged them with this Commission. On the very day of His resurrection, He told His disciples, "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21). It may also have been on this occasion that He instructed them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). At least eight days later, on a mountain in Galilee, He commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). And finally, before His ascension He tells them, "You shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the last part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Summarizing these commands, we can say that Christ has charged His church to (1) go into all the world; (2) preach the Gospel to all people; and (3) make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all He commanded.

It is important to note that the Commission is more than sharing the gospel. Too often the Great Commission has been equated with world evangelization. To be sure, the Commission requires world evangelization, but it is so much more than that. To fulfill Christ's command the church must make followers of Jesus from all nations, followers who obey all He commanded, who follow Him completely. The apostle Paul understood this. He not only warned every man he saw; he taught every man he could to bring as many as possible to completion in Christ (Colossians 1:28). When an individual responds to the gospel of Christ, the work has just begun. Fulfilling Christ's Commission in that individual's life requires that I help him grow to his fullest potential in Christ. Character must develop, and habits must change. Truth must affect every area of his life before the task is done.

As an army the church has been given direction and purpose. It has an objective beyond itself to reach. It becomes a means to an end—not a self-centered little fellowship, but a group with a goal that is bigger than itself. In too many churches the purpose of the church is to be a successful (or impressive or intimate) church. Viewed as an army, the church does not exist for its own sake. It is going somewhere. It has as its objective the fulfillment of Christ's command to disciple all nations.

In considering the church and the Great Commission, it is helpful to reflect on the typical approach to the role of the local church in fulfilling the Commission. In describing the typical approach, I must speak in generalities. Of course, there will be many exceptions

to what I suggest. Still, it is useful to consider the common approach to this issue and to compare it to the approach of the church in the New Testament. If we are to restore the biblical pattern, the church as God's army must become a practical reality among us.

What is the typical approach to the role of the local church in fulfilling the Commission? Four areas come to mind. First is the very common idea that each local church has some kind of responsibility to reach out to the area surrounding it. This may be an entire city or only a small neighborhood. Or this area of responsibility may be defined in terms of the natural contacts and relationships of the church members. In pursuing this responsibility, the church feels that it is doing its part to fulfill the Commission.

Second is the financial support of individual missionaries or of mission societies or organizations. For the average Christian this may be his most significant, most meaningful involvement in fulfilling the Great Commission. Perhaps he sends \$25 a month to a missionary in Japan. Every Christmas he receives a postcard with a picture of the missionary family. He places it on the bulletin board in the kitchen and tries to remember to pray for the missionaries. Or perhaps he helps with a fundraising drive in the church to increase the annual missions offering from \$25,000 to \$30,000. He devotes some time to this effort and even increases his own giving. His sacrifice is commendable, but this may be the most significant thing he ever does to reach the world for Christ. Financial support for missions is biblical and essential. It is a critical element in the success of any

effort to fulfill the Great Commission. I have no desire to demean those who support Christian workers at great personal sacrifice. It is in fact commendable. I am only saying that often this is the closest that many come to personal involvement in reaching the world for Christ.

The third area involves the actual sending out of missionaries to do the work. The specifics differ widely from church to church and denomination to denomination, but one way the local church commonly views itself as involved in the Commission is that occasionally it gives up some member of the congregation to be a missionary. Perhaps a church member was stationed in Korea while in the Army and now feels a burden for the Korean people. He will get training somewhere, and the church will send him out in a special way. He may technically be sent by the denominational mission board, but his home church will support him financially more than others and pray for him more. Every two years he will return with a slide show of the work in Korea. In the view of the church this is a significant part of how it is helping with the Great Commission.

Finally, the local church probably will work through mission societies or mission organizations. One church may even work through more than one organization. The organizations may be denominational or interdenominational. In this view the mission society, not the church, is the real vehicle for reaching the world. In describing the typical approach to the role of the church in the Great Commission, I do not intend to imply that these areas are completely wrong. As Jesus said in a different

context), "These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23).

If the local church is to function as God intended, as an advancing army, a more biblical approach to world conquest for Christ is essential. If I were to label this approach, I might call it "the expanding church" or "the reproducing church." We are all familiar with the concept that if an individual believer is mature and healthy, he is going to reproduce. He will share Christ with someone who responds. Then he will pour out love and truth until this new Christian matures in Christ. In fact, a healthy Christian will not only reproduce, he will reproduce reproducers. We are all familiar with the natural process of multiplication. As children grow to adulthood, they marry and begin families of their own. What I want you to consider with me is that the role of the church in the Great Commission should involve the same kind of multiplication. Much like a family, a healthy growing church should be reproducing churches that will eventually be all over the world. This is the expanding or reproducing church. I believe the local church has the ability to provide the training, the manpower and the financial resources to expand across a nation and even internationally.

Exactly what are the elements of a reproducing church? What is the biblical approach to the role of the church in the Great Commission?

First, a reproducing church has a vision to be used by God in regions beyond its immediate locality or sphere of influence. We find this kind of vision in the pages of

the New Testament. In Acts 8 the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered by persecution across Judea and Samaria. The church had been ravaged; both men and women had been imprisoned; the Christians fled the city. And what did these fleeing Christians do? Did they cower in fear? They did something we would not expect at all: they went everywhere continuing to communicate the good news of life in Christ. And Acts 8 makes it clear that these were not the leaders, but just rank and file believers! That says something about the vision and commitment of all the Christians.

With the conversion of Saul, the persecution ceased. The church enjoyed peace and progress (Acts 9:31). In Acts 11 "those who were scattered because of the persecution ... made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch," sharing the gospel. Notice that when the persecution stopped, they didn't, they kept going. Why did they do that? I believe it was because of their vision to affect regions beyond them. Because of their vision to reach out beyond their normal sphere of influence, they also shared with Gentiles as well as Jews. On his third journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:8-10). While he was there, all the province of Asia heard about Christ. In the first century there were at least eight churches in Asia. Paul visited only Ephesus. What was happening here? Paul and those with him were headquartered in one city, a major city. As they trained and taught the Christians, there was an explosion of the gospel into all the surrounding areas. It seems that in his later ministry, Paul entered a region and planted churches in one or two principal cities. Then he left the region with the understanding that the church would expand

or reproduce itself into its surrounding area. In 1 Thessalonians Paul commends the Thessalonians and offers them to us as an example because the word of the Lord sounded forth from Thessalonica all across Macedonia and Achaia. Paul planted a church there. It expanded across the region. We cannot easily escape the conclusion that as Paul taught the Christians, he instilled in them a vision to share truth in the regions beyond them. I am not suggesting that each one was on some special mission to share Christ, but they had enough commitment and vision to buy up the opportunities to reach out to those around them. Thus, as an army, the local church today must have a vision to reach out and be used by God beyond its immediate locality.

As a second aspect of a reproducing church, every member should sense some general responsibility to see that the Great Commission is fulfilled. This aspect is implied in every scriptural reference mentioned above. The early church was an evangelistic dynamo largely because of the sense of vision and responsibility felt by the Christians in general. I believe every Christian is just as responsible to give themselves to fulfill the Great Commission as he is to love his neighbor. Many times, Paul challenged whole churches (not just leaders) to imitate him. Often these exhortations were set in the context of Paul's losing his life to reach the world for Christ. He obviously felt that all Christians had some general responsibility to live as he did, to sacrifice for the same purposes. The fruit of his teaching can be seen in the churches he planted that expanded beyond their borders.

The responsibility to see the Commission fulfilled becomes a live issue when we realize that many around us are not doing much to advance God's kingdom. More important, the weight of responsibility comes when we realize that the task is not being done today. In the face of tremendous spiritual need, it will not do for me to say, "Well, as long as I'm reaching a few people, I'm doing my part." The responsibility is to disciple the nations. If I take that responsibility seriously and others do not, my only option is to make up for what others are not doing. If my Christian brother drops the ball, my first approach may be to try to get him to pick it up. But if he is not going to pick it up, I must step in and help. This is what I mean by a general sense of responsibility to see the task completed.

Third, every member in the local church should be involved in the work of proclaiming the gospel and building other Christians. This overlaps a great deal with what we already have said about an every-member ministry. Rather than thinking our involvement in fulfilling the Commission consists only of sending our money to Korea or to India, we should see ourselves as doing the actual work of reaching people. Of course, in any healthy church there will always be new ones who are less committed and young ones who lack training. The point is this: our mindset should be that all Christians (not just the missionary elite) are the manpower for advancing the kingdom of God. Every Christian should be involved in the work.

As you read the New Testament, you will begin to see that most of the known world in the first century was reached by Christians whose names we do not know. Christianity swept the Roman world in fewer than thirty years, which is as phenomenal as it is unprecedented. It was not primarily the work of Peter or John or Paul. The bulk of the work was done by ordinary Christians - what we would call informal missionaries or lay people. Without formal training or formal position, they reached the world for Christ.

This kind of labor involves sacrifice. We should not be surprised to find that spiritual battle is costly. Having every member involved in the work implies a willingness to sacrifice and a vision to grow into responsibility. I personally find this exciting. For too long the calls of Christ to discipleship and to sacrifice have been reserved for the few - the clergy and the missionaries. And yet it is so obvious that Christ addressed us all. Understanding that all are to do the work, all are to join the battle, makes the call to sacrifice and commitment alive with meaning. Why should the average Christian refrain from laying up treasure on earth if he has no immediate opportunity to lay up treasure in heaven? Why shouldn't he save his life if there is no practical way he can lose it for Christ's sake and the gospel's?

A final aspect of a multiplying church is the evangelistic team. By an "evangelistic team" I simply mean a group of mature Christians (it might be very small or quite large) who move together into new areas to share Christ and plant churches. If the local church has a vision to be effective beyond its immediate locality, if the individual members feel a

responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission, if they are equipped and involved in the work of reaching people, and if leaders are being multiplied, the church will be able to send out teams of trained leaders and workers to other parts of the state or nation or world. It will do this because it has the human resources and the vision to do so.

In the early church the idea of a team would have seemed normal. Peter along with six others took the gospel to the household of Cornelius. Only Peter received the vision instructing him to go, but he took others with him. Antioch was first reached with the gospel by a team of men from Cyprus and Cyrene. Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark later left Antioch for Galatia. By Acts 20 Paul had a team of seven men drawn from various churches.

There are many practical benefits of a team as opposed to the individual missionary: (1) A team will be more effective in evangelism because of increased manpower and the witness of a group of people living in harmony and loving one another. This is how others know that we are His disciples. (2) A team provides a diversity of gifts and abilities to meet new believers' needs and build them to maturity. (3) A team combats discouragement. When one is down another can pick him up. (4) A team provides protection against error or sin as team members are on guard for one another. (5) A team makes it possible for Christians with a wide variety of gifts and abilities to be vitally involved in fulfilling the Great Commission.

What does a reproducing church look like? The following list is definitely not exhaustive, but it would

at least include: a church with a vision to be used by God in regions beyond its immediate locality; every member sensing a general responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission; every member involved in the work of advancing God's kingdom; and workers and leaders continually being trained and sent out as teams. What I am saying is that in the biblical pattern the local church does not just reach the surrounding area. It ought to do so, but that is just the beginning. It also should view itself as a training center for workers, people who will be thrust out in wave after wave of church-planting teams. This is the reproducing church.

The reproducing church is the church as an army. It is the conquering church, the church with direction and focus. I cannot emphasize enough the qualitative difference in the church's spiritual life that is produced by embracing the Great Commission as the real and immediate responsibility of the local church. It gives a direction and purpose and drive that is difficult to explain and impossible to imitate.

Edward Hayes has summarized it well:

The church is but a base of operations, a training center for world evangelism; a school of Christian workers; a hospital for those bruised by the battle; an assembly line where men of God are equipped for doing the work of God. It is a spiritual maternity ward for the birth of lives which will later reproduce themselves in a spiritual progeny. It is a recruiting office for soldiers of the cross. It is these and more, but it is not the center of "do-nothing Christianity or a cloister for contented, complacent pew-sitters. The

tendency to build a kingdom on the corner must not be perpetuated if a world is to be reached. The church must become less a mutual admiration society and more an advancing army, less a lighthouse on the corner and more a spreading flame. Has not the time come for serious investigation into our lethargy, a vigorous reappraisal of our stereotyped methods? Has not the time come for a new stance based on the changeless foundation of revelation? The time has come."

Without question a book could be written defining the characteristics of a properly functioning church. I have offered only a few pages. I have raised the issues in this booklet because in my own convictions and experience. These continue to be areas of great need in the church today. I have been involved in local churches where these truths were only doctrines and statements of faith. And I also have been with churches where these truths were a life-giving, practical reality. What should a church look like? It should look like a family with all the love, care, and commitment that implies. It should look like a body, each part performing its essential function. It should look like an army, sacrificing to advance God's kingdom in a fallen world.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe some of the New Testament imagery of conflict and battle. Do you normally view the Christian life with this perspective?
2. How does the image of a "conquering army" compare to that of most modern churches? How is the church to conquer? Why should the church's activities be offensive, not defensive?
3. A successful army has direction and purpose. What is the direction and purpose of the church? What objectives should we have? Why are local churches necessary for reaching these objectives?
4. Practically speaking, what does it mean for a local church to fulfill the Great Commission? What priority should the Commission have? How would adopting this emphasis change your church?
5. What are the elements comprising an expanding church? Discuss the practical aspects of each.
6. Why is it important to stress that each church member has a responsibility for fulfilling the Great Commission? In what ways do typical churches avoid such individual responsibility?

7. Why is it important for every church member to know that he is personally responsible for helping fulfill the Great Commission? How might our churches be different today if each member took this responsibility seriously?

8. What sacrifices will be required to build a "multiplying church"? With these in mind, how will you decide your career plans, your place of residence, and other major decisions? How will your criteria in these choices be radically different from those of society at large or typical church members?

***The essential thing is this:
to be able at any time to sacrifice
what we are, for what we could become."***

Where Do We Go from Here?

We have raised a high standard for the church in these pages. We have said that the church can once again be what God intended her to be. But tomorrow is another day, crowded with the mundane affairs of everyday life and change is difficult to accomplish and maintain. What will you do? How will you change? Will this be just another book that stirred your thinking for a day?

In these few pages I have intended to discuss life, not dogma. I have not written to amuse or entertain or even to simply instruct. My hope is that you will do something with what you have read, that it will change your life. Years ago, I was first confronted with the principles you have just read. My life has never been the same, not because I heard, but because I acted. My challenge to you is this: do not hear truth and fail to act upon it. Those who hear truth without obeying it are not only disobedient, they are deluded (James 1:21-24). You must take action. But what exactly should you do? Where do we go from here?

You could attempt to start a properly functioning church. But this is not easily done. It should be attempted only by the mature and then only with the help of others. Before embarking on such an

enterprise, we must honestly face the question, "Is it necessary?" Independence in the Christian life is not a virtue. It will not do to start our own church to escape (we think) spiritual authority in our lives. I would strongly encourage anyone considering this to talk long and honestly with those who have successfully planted properly functioning churches. If you are not part of such a church, you must recognize that you are attempting to reproduce something you have never seen or experienced firsthand. This is not easy. There are many pitfalls.

Revitalizing your present church can be a difficult and delicate challenge. If you should attempt this option, it is of utmost importance that you work in complete unity with the leadership in your local church. You may be able to help, but major changes always should be initiated by the leadership and under its direction. Working from within without the knowledge of the leadership has tremendous potential for division (Romans 16:17). I would never advise anyone to do it.

If you are in leadership in a local church, you will be encouraged to know that whole churches have been transformed from the inside out when the leaders helped to implement the changes. This is happening in many places today. With instruction and encouragement from leaders who have helped others like yourself, your present church can come to life with vision and purpose. Your church can experience the practical reality of being like a family, a body and an army.

For most, the best response to what you have just read is to find and join a properly functioning church. It will not surprise you when I say I am presently involved in such a church. For many years now (since about 1970) I have been involved in the U.S. and in Europe with a group of churches who are committed to these principles. The strategy is to accomplish this purpose by putting into practice the principles and truths you have just read. In the meantime, God has raised up thousands of men and women who are committed to the church as a family, a body and an army. These are people who are committed to use any and every means to reach every nation for Christ in our generation.

If you are uncertain where or how to join with others who are already practicing what you have learned in this book, write to Great Commission Europe (www.gcweb.org) for more information on how you can get involved. A number of years ago I took a similar step. It required that I exchange my plans for God's. Initially, it seemed a bit frightening and too radical, but I have never been sorry. Someone once said, "The essential thing is this: to be able at any time to sacrifice what we are for what we could become." I sacrificed my plans for God's plans. Without hesitation, I would make the same choice again.

So why another booklet on the church? Because God wants to use the church, and you as one of its members, to reflect His character and advance His kingdom. God wants glory from the church. The more we can make it what He intends it to be, the more glory He receives. My hope and prayer is that you will

wholeheartedly follow Jesus Christ and that God will be glorified in you. “To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.”

Other helpful resources:

Letters to the Church (Francis Chan)

The Trellis and the Vine (Colin Marshall & Tony Payne)

Organic Church (Neil Cole)

Christ Loved the Church (William MacDonald)

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**plant churches,
make disciples,
and reach the nations
through Europe.**



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