

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

Mike McGuire

The grass withers, the flowers fade,
but the word of our God remains forever.
(Isa 40:8)

The Church's Image in and Message to the Community

As the staff gathered around the church conference room, they were introduced to the church consultant. They faced two major issues: What had been the church's image in the community, and what image did they want to create?

The consultant pointed out that the church cannot *not* communicate an image to the community, so they needed to think carefully because their choice would influence everything about the church (for example, the proposed building remodel, promotional materials, scheduling, and literature). Some younger staff members pointed out the need for the church to be more relevant to younger people. Older staff pointed to the church's successful past, seeing little reason for changing. Others wanted the church to have a more upbeat and positive image. Still others argued that the church needed to get back to basics. There seemed to be little agreement concerning the needed image of the church.

The church consultant was right to say that the church cannot *not* communicate and, further, right to say that the church's chosen image should influence everything it does. One observation needed to be made and one question needed to be asked. The group needed to observe that the church's image is tied inextricably to its message, and the group needed to ask whether the church's message is up for discussion.

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

This chapter will suggest that, although different churches will accommodate their message to differing cultures and subcultures, the core message of the church to the community is not up for discussion. The church is required by its allegiance to God to present the biblical message. Thus, this chapter will ask two key questions: (1) Why does the Bible deserve this preeminent role? (2) Why must church staff members, the servants of God, give the Bible this preeminent role? The chapter will then turn to the practical implications of the answers provided to these questions.

Does the Bible Deserve the Preeminent Role?

In considering whether the Bible deserves the preeminent role in the church's educational mission, this section will examine how the Bible describes itself and then examine how evangelical theologians have described it.

A Biblical Self-Description

Old Testament (OT) writers repeatedly claimed to speak God's words. They recorded God speaking just as freely as they recorded humans speaking, and the OT is peppered with "thus says the Lord." Our Lord and the writers of the New Testament (NT) assumed that the OT was revelation from God and thus truthful, even in its details.

Matthew reported that Christ debated with His detractors using the tense of a word from the OT (Matt 22:29-32). Jesus' argument rested upon the tense of the OT quotation in verse 32, which reads, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." This passage was well-known to Jesus' audience, for in it God revealed Himself to Moses from the burning bush by revealing His name YHWH (I AM). In the context God declared Himself to be (our English present tense) not only the God of Moses (who was living) but to be the God of those who had died (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Thus Jesus argued, based on the tense of the verb in the OT quotation, that God is the God of the both those then living and those living on after their death.

Similarly, Paul made a theological argument in which he depended on whether a word in an OT passage was singular or plural (Gal 3:16-17). Clearly, both Jesus and Paul believed in the truthfulness of

the details of the OT. Peter described how men were moved by the Holy Spirit to write documents that were not their personal interpretations (2 Pet 1:21). Paul exhorted Timothy to study the OT, declaring that "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim 3:16).

The NT church, having received the OT as God's Word, viewed the documents written by apostles as similarly inspired.¹ The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, "Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe" (Heb 1:1-2). What was written in the OT and what Jesus said were both seen as from God and truthful. By the time Peter wrote his second letter, he was equating the writings of Paul with the OT Scriptures (2 Pet 3:15-16).² This equation and comparison of the OT prophets and the NT apostles also shows up in 1 Pet 1:10-12 and 2 Pet 3:2. The Jews had accepted the OT as inspired as did Jesus and the authors of the NT. The church then recognized that God had given them new revelation that was equally inspired and equally true as the Scriptures that they accepted as inspired and true. The eternal value of God's revelation was captured when Isaiah declared, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, / but the word of our God remains forever" (Isa 40:8) and when Peter reiterated this very truth (1 Pet 1:24-25). Both the OT and the NT affirm that the Word of God is eternal, for it is the word of the true God and is of eternal value.

Theological Descriptions of the Bible

Theology represents an attempt to summarize the teachings of the church. For those Christians who emphasize the Bible over church tradition or philosophical speculation, these summaries attempt to capture the essence of what the Bible teaches. Thus, theological statements about the Bible summarize what the Bible teaches about itself. A brief summary of some of the key terms follow.

¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1978; reprint, Peabody, MA: Prince, 2004), 56.

² Grudem points to 1 Tim 5:17-18 as another example of one NT document recognizing another NT document as Scripture. For the details see W. A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 61.

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

Theologians describe the Bible as revelation.³ It is seen as revealing who God is, who we are, what is wrong with us, and what we need to do to bring ourselves into harmony with God. They affirm that the Bible is inspired.⁴ Although in everyday English we speak of authors being inspired, Paul wrote, "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim 3:16). That is, it is the document and not the author that is inspired. They affirm that the Bible is authoritative. If God, by definition, is the highest of all authorities and if the Bible is His message to humans, then it follows that the Bible derives its authority from God.⁵ Since the Bible is from God and carries His authority, then it is competent to accomplish His purposes.⁶ Isaiah declared, "So My word that comes from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and will prosper in what I send it to do" (Isa. 55:11). They affirm that the Bible is true, for God is the God of truth and the source of all truth. God does not lie but speaks the truth. As Paul declared, "God must be true" (Rom 3:4). Thus, since the Bible is God's Word, it is the truth.⁷

Theologians refer to the Bible as the canon, an old term referring to a measuring stick.⁸ In other words the Bible is the standard for authoritative teaching in the church.⁹ Thus, the message of every teacher can be judged by comparing what the teacher says against this standard (see Acts 17:1-14). When the reformers declared their belief in *sola Scriptura*, they were affirming that "only Scripture" (and not church tradition) establishes the standard for the authoritative doctrines of the church.

The above doctrines are common conservative, evangelical, theological descriptions of God's Word, but two more descriptions are pertinent to this discussion. These can be considered together by affirming that the Bible is alien yet relevant. It is alien for it does not

³ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 272; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 49.

⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 73-77.

⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 271.

⁶ Although this doctrine is assumed by conservative evangelical theologians, Grudem develops it in his *Systematic Theology*, 127-38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-100.

⁸ R. L. Saucy, "Which Books Belong in the Bible?" in *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. C. R. Swindoll and R. B. Zuck (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 111.

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 259, 271.

come from our culture, and it is relevant because God has made it so. First, it is alien to contemporary audiences because of its human authors and context.¹⁰ The books that compose the Bible were written by people living in ancient times, composed in ancient languages, and written to ancient peoples living in ancient cultures. Any attentive reader will be aware of the cultural gap between this ancient world and the contemporary one. Second, the Bible is alien to contemporary audiences because of its divine Author. Although humans were coauthors and their personalities and backgrounds show in their writings, the Bible did not come ultimately from humans and their personal interpretations (2 Pet 1:20–21). The writers were moved by God, and so this revelation came from above, from God, from the kingdom of light. It came to those who live below, to humans, to those in a sin-darkened world. Thus, the Bible is alien to contemporary audiences for exactly the same reason it was alien to its ancient audiences: because its divine Author thinks differently about the world than do humans. Yet, in spite of its alien qualities, the Bible is profoundly relevant. It is relevant because God, who knows all, has spoken to the deepest of human needs. He knows us and our needs far better than we know ourselves, for He created us and shaped us. He knows what sin and rebellion have done to us. He knows what we need to know about our deliverance in this world and our ultimate deliverance in the world to come. He chose the situations to which His servants spoke, guided what they spoke, and preserved what He desired to preserve. He fully intended these words to stand for all time. Thus, the divine Author has designed the Bible to be relevant to human audiences at every time and in all cultures. It is relevant because, although the contemporary audience may differ in language, culture, and technology with its original audiences, the contemporary audience shares much in common (e.g., spiritually, physically, and emotionally) with those original audiences. It is relevant to audiences today because God had His servants in ages past write documents that met the needs of their target audience—needs that God knew were universal. His message is also relevant to contemporary audiences

¹⁰ Almost all advocates of the verbal, plenary view of inspiration are careful to deny the dictation theory of inspiration, recognizing that God worked through human authors and that the personality and writing styles of those human authors are clearly observable in the biblical documents. See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 232–33.

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

because they share those needs, whether felt or not. Thus, contemporary teachers and their audiences need to discover this relevance just as our spiritual forefathers have discovered it throughout history and just as our spiritual siblings do so around the world.

The Bible, God's special revelation, is crucial to a proper understanding of God, Christ, sin, salvation, and the church. It is crucial for one seeking to grow in the grace of the knowledge of Christ. With the Bible these concepts have particular meanings. Without the Bible one could assign any definitions one preferred, and a true Bible-based Christianity would cease to exist. As Lewis and Demarest have observed, "Clearly, special revelation is foundational to the entire Christian scheme of things."¹¹ So given what the Bible says of itself and what theologians have reasoned from its text, the Bible deserves the preeminent role in the educational mission of the church.¹² Now the question is this: Should God's servants give it this preeminent role?

Should God's Servants Give the Bible the Preeminent Role?

There are many ways to portray the believer's relationship to God and His Word. For example, God brings us forth by His Word so that we are His children (Jas 1:18). He sanctifies us by His Word so that we are a set-apart people, a holy priesthood (John 17:17; 1 Pet 2:5). Given, however, the brevity of this chapter, it will only consider one motif: the minister as servant. So, what is it about the servant of God motif that might profitably guide the attitude of God's servant concerning the Bible in the educational ministry of the church?

God's Servants Then

In the Bible those who were God's ministers were consistently referred to as His servants. These include Moses (Heb 3:5), David (Luke 1:69), and even our Lord, Jesus Christ (Matt 12:18). Similarly, many of the authors of the NT letters referred to themselves as slaves

¹¹ G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 96.

¹² Responding to the possible objection that this is a circular argument (i.e., the Bible is important because it says that it is important) is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a succinct response is provided by Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 78–79.

of God (Rom 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1; and Rev 1:1). In addition to the words *servant* and *slave*, the word *steward* (or *manager*) is also sometimes used to describe servants and ministers.¹³ Relevant to our topic, Paul identified his fellow ministers and himself as "managers of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1) linking the message of God and the role of God's servant-managers (i.e., stewards). These men were all servants in the sense of going about doing God's will, often including speaking for God. As servants of God, they were to promote the message of God (Gal 1:10; 2 Pet 1:20).

God's Servants Now

God still calls those who believe in Him to serve Him. Thus, God still calls men and women to be His servants and to promote His message faithfully. The faithful servant is a student of God's Word (see 2 Tim 2:15 and 4:13). Once the servant has understood the Bible and obeyed it, the Bible then provides the subject matter for the servant's message. The faithful servant proclaims "the message of truth" (Col 1:5), "sound teaching" (1 Tim 6:3, Titus 2:1), "the pattern of sound teaching" (2 Tim 1:13), and "the faithful message" (Titus 1:9). This contrasts with those who promote "myths" (Titus 1:14), "foolish and ignorant disputes" (2 Tim 2:23), and "irreverent and silly myths" (1 Tim 4:7). As Paul wrote to Timothy, "If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" (1 Tim 4:6). In the NT context, this clearly means that the faithful servant of God is to point people to the Bible and the truths taught there.

¹³ The NT uses a variety of terms to refer to servants, including (1) *pais* meaning "one who is committed to total obedience to another" (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker [BAGD], 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], s.v. *pais*) and often translated *servant* or *slave*, (2) *doulos* meaning "one who is solely committed to another" (BAGD, s.v. *doulos*) and often translated *bond servant* or *slave*, and (3) *oikonomos* meaning "one who is entrusted with management . . . [an] administrator" (BAGD, s.v. *oikonomos*) and often translated *manager* or *steward*. Louw and Nida provide clarification, pointing out that *doulos* means a "slave in the sense of becoming the property of an owner" (J. Louw and E. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 [New York: United Bible Societies, 1989] domain 87.76). These three words provide some sense of what the NT authors meant by being a servant of God.

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

Nevertheless, the wise servant knows that some will reject the message because the servant knows from the Bible that some even then heard the message as odd and alien and thus failed to embrace the message of God. It thus should not surprise the servant that some today do not see the importance of the Bible as curriculum. Therefore, the servant in educational ministry declares the Word of God as faithfully and winsomely as possible even if the audience rejects both the message and the servant-messenger.

This role of the servant crying boldly in the wilderness frightens some potential servants while appealing to others. It frightens those who value human approval too much and value God's approval too little. It appeals to some because God has called them to such a ministry, and it, unfortunately, appeals to others because they like the image of being God's servant and the servant of no man.

God, however, does not only call us to be His servants, but He calls us to be the servants of others. Jesus said to His disciples, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all" (Mark 10:43-44). Paul, similarly, asked the reader to embrace service to others, pointing to the examples found in Christ, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself, exhorting his audience not to look to their own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:6-8, 17, 19, 25-29). Consequently, the servant of God is not only a messenger of God but is a self-sacrificial servant of others.

The servant of others will consider the other's point of view and seek ways to accommodate this biblical message so that it might be understandable and appealing (1 Cor 9:19-23). Being a servant of others requires one to be strategic in one's approach to serving people. As Paul wrote, "For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people" (1 Cor 9:19).

Some who relish the idea of being the bold prophet crying in the wilderness, if they liked this image for mainly personal reasons and not for divine ones, are uncomfortable with the role of a servant to others. For to be a servant of others, one must give attention to those one serves, to their interests and their concerns (Phil 2:4). For just as one should know God well to serve Him, one should also understand

people well in order to serve them. Thus, the servant of God in educational ministry must be a student of the Bible and of people.

Thus far we have seen how ministers are called to serve God. This leads to boldness and clarity of purpose in declaring God's Word as God's Word. We have also seen how ministers are called to serve others and how this insight leads to the need for understanding our audience and in packaging our message so that it might communicate the biblical message accurately and effectively to our contemporary audience.¹⁴ Now we turn to the role of the steward, the servant who is over other servants, one who calls and enables others to serve. The servant of God, who serves others, quickly becomes aware of the need for more servants in God's service and thus the need both to call others to become servants and then to enable them in various ministries. Accordingly, the wise servant of God must have plans for recruiting and incorporating more people into ministry.

Some servants are so faithful that God places them in charge of other servants. This servant has become an administrator (what the KJV referred to as a steward) and has become responsible for seeing that others serve the Master effectively. Christ recognized the value of this vital administrative role when He said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible manager his master will put in charge of his household servants . . . ? That slave whose master finds him working when he comes will be rewarded" (Luke 12:42-43). This faithful administrator is exceptionally valuable to our Lord's service, having the personal and interpersonal skills to plan, organize, motivate, and manage other servants for his Master.

The administrator is often required to reduce the amount of personal time given to frontline ministry. Nevertheless, the educational staff member with the skills of an administrator is exceptionally valuable to the church because this staff member acts as a "force multiplier," for the wise administrator is able to multiply the ministry by calling, organizing, and enabling others to serve. This administrator role is at the heart of effective educational ministry. In summary, the servant role includes faithful service to both God and others and may

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

97

include faithful management of other servants. Yet in all these tasks, the servant is the servant to the Master and to the Master's message.

Given the nature of the Bible and the nature of the servants of God, the Bible deserves and should be given the preeminent role in the educational ministry of the church. For how can the servants of God tell God that His ideas should take second place to their own? Thus, educational ministers, as the servants of God, should give the Bible the preeminent place in the educational ministry of the church. The issue left is this: What are the implications of this role for the educational ministry of the church?

Implications for Educational Ministry

The above examination of both the nature of the Bible and the nature of the servants of God suggests that the educational ministry of the church should be God serving, biblically faithful, audience accommodating, servant building, and well managed. This section will now focus on implications for the broader educational mission of the church drawn from these observations. It will then consider the issue of what it means to be biblically faithful and will end with a consideration of how these insights potentially relate to the other chapters of this book.

Educational Mission and Educational Ministry

Every intentional ministry of the church has an educational component. The church worships, helps the poor, and comforts the hurting so that the church is not just preaching or teaching; however, all of these ministries send a message and thus are all part of a distinctively Christian educational process. Hence, the educational function of the church is larger than what the church might place under the oversight of an educational minister (the stewards described above), for the pastor and choir director, counselors and deacons, also fulfill an educational function.

As seen above, the revelation of God is the message of the entire church and thus includes the church's educational ministry. The church, in trying to reach more people, might consider what style of ministry is appropriate given their community or might consider how ministry styles may differ in reaching adolescents versus adults,

¹⁴ J. D. Charles has provided a particularly insightful analysis of Paul promoting the biblical message to a pagan culture in "Paul before the Areopagus: Reflections on the Apostle's Encounter with Cultured Paganism," *Philosophia Christi* 7 (2005): 125-40.

but the church does not have a choice of messages. All groups within the church should be committed to the Bible as God's message.

This message will strike some as alien, for it is alien.¹⁵ It comes from the kingdom of light into a darkened world. We should expect it to say things that do not fit our sense of what we need for it may address needs that God sees and we, in our finite and fallen state, do not. The message will also strike some as alien for these documents were originally written in ancient languages to people who lived in ancient cultures. The Bible, however, is relevant because God designed it to be so. God moved His servants of the past to write documents to address what was needed, and He superintended the writing so that these documents might be said to be authored by Him. It is the church's responsibility to communicate this importance and relevance to their contemporary audience. It is particularly important for the educational ministry to communicate this relevance to contemporary audiences because it is particularly prepared to work with small groups. Thus, the educational ministry can communicate the relevance of the biblical message to those particular groups. This involves not merely the training of teachers but also the choice of curriculum.

The Bible as Curriculum

If one understands the nature of the Bible and the nature of being a servant of God, then one must choose literature for the church that is faithful to the Bible and its message. This literature must have as its goal the communication of the Bible and its message to people. This communication is done in a way that accurately reflects the original text, that is understandable to the audience, and that challenges the audience in a way that is consistent with the original text.

What is meant by accurately reflecting the original text might be addressed through a thought experiment. As a teacher, picture yourself teaching a passage of Scripture and having the human author of that biblical passage sitting at the back of your class or on the back

¹⁵ God's message appeared alien and thus served as a corrective to ancient culture, premodern culture, and modern culture. Now the biblical message may appear particularly alien to younger Christians who have grown up in a postmodern culture, but this is merely one more "culture" that God wishes to correct. See M. J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 59–86.

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

pew of your church. Assume, for example, that you are teaching the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John concerning Jesus and the woman at the well, and among the students you have the apostle John. Further assume that God has provided him with a thorough knowledge of your audience's culture. A biblically faithful message would communicate John's message to a contemporary audience and receive his approval. A pseudo-biblical message would leave the apostle feeling his words had been taken out of context and twisted to fit your preconceived notions. So as you teach, would John smile approvingly or sit there with a confused look?

A similar standard would apply to entire books of the Bible. If one is teaching the entire Gospel of John over some period of time, then the standard would be whether the contemporary teacher's goal and focus reflect the author's goal (see John 20:30–31). It is important to reflect the entire book for two reasons. Many people in the church may know a passage here or there but do not have any idea what any entire book in the Bible says. Yet the books of the NT were written to be read to the congregation, probably an entire book at a single reading. In addition, not only passages have meaning, but these individual passages contribute to the meaning of the larger document. If one does not understand the larger document, one may easily misunderstand the passages within it. It is crucial for people to understand books as well as passages and verses.

A similar standard would work even for lessons that are drawn from multiple passages (as was done in sections of this chapter). If the lesson is pulled from passages written by OT prophet A and NT apostles B and C, then the question becomes this: Would these three approve of the way that you have chosen to use what God revealed through them? Or would they suspect the message originated with you, the contemporary teacher, and the passages quoted were merely used to make the lesson appear as if it were from the Bible and thus authoritative?

What is true of your teaching should also be true of the literature chosen by the church. It should reflect the meaning in the original context and at the same time state this meaning in a way that accommodates that message to the culture of a contemporary audience. Thus, how the message is packaged varies. The literature for a lay

Bible doctrines class would differ in form from the literature used by a support group, which, in turn, would differ in form from the literature used by a class for sixth graders. These differing purposes would produce differing approaches to communication. Yet all would be faithful to the Bible and thus to the God of the Bible.

The purpose of having a biblically faithful curriculum is not merely an end in itself, but the purpose is to bring people to a saving faith in Christ, to a trusting relationship with the Father, and to an empowering relationship with the Spirit. The purpose includes developing an accurate view of who God is, learning to see the world from God's perspective, developing a heart for evangelism, and encouraging biblically faithful relationships with those in and outside the church. The goal of such literature should be to encourage a solidly Christian perspective of all of life and to help people avoid the errors that lead to spiritual darkness. Its ultimate goal is to transform individuals, couples, families, and communities into conformity to what God desires. The purpose of promoting a biblically faithful curriculum is to honor God and to accomplish His goals for your community.

An Evaluative Checklist

There is a danger in thinking higher of oneself than one ought because it is difficult to be self-critical while it is easy to fall into criticizing others.¹⁶ With this in mind, the following set of questions are offered to promote healthy self-critique.

1. Does your educational program communicate the Bible faithfully?
 - a. Does it communicate passages accurately?
 - b. Does it communicate the meaning of entire books accurately?
2. Does your program communicate the alien nature of the biblical message so that the audience truly understands the Bible's surprising message?

¹⁶ Romans 12:3 warns against this tendency, which results in our being overly generous in evaluating our own programs while being overly critical of the programs of others. S. K. Moroney convincingly argues from theological and psychological sources that we humans tend to distort reality to our own advantage. See his *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000).

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

3. Does your program communicate the relevance of the biblical message so that your contemporary audience grasps how this biblical message might apply to them and how they might change their lives in light of biblical truth?
4. Does your educational program accommodate to the culture of the audience without distorting the biblical message?
5. Is your educational program drawing people to a closer relationship with God and more biblical relationships with others?
6. Does your educational program communicate sound doctrine?
7. Is your educational program transforming how your church sees the world?
8. Is your program merely producing an audience, or is it producing more servants of God and others?
9. Is your educational ministry communicating to the broader community a clear image of a NT church that is committed to God and His ministry among people?
10. On a 1-to-10 scale, with 1 being exceptionally low and 10 being exceptionally high, how would you rate your church on how well your educational program is serving God? How do you think God would rate your church?

Other Implications for Educational Ministry

It is important for the reader not to miss the relationship between this chapter and other chapters in this volume. Those chapters will not take the time to reestablish the Bible as curriculum but will develop issues merely mentioned or hinted at here. For example, the chapter on the church (chap. 8) establishes the congregational context in which the biblical curriculum is taught. The chapters on organization and administration (chaps. 2 and 21) provide insight about being a steward in promoting effective ministry. The chapters on administration and volunteers (chaps. 21 and 22) address issues related to recruiting and working along with other servants. The chapter on studying the Bible (chap. 12) will help you know how to study the Bible and train volunteers how to teach others to study.

Chapters on preschoolers, youth, adults, and families (chaps. 15, 16, 17, and 18) will help you accommodate the biblical message to those groups. The chapter on learning experiences (chap. 14) will help you

understand how to communicate the biblical message effectively and creatively to a contemporary audience (another aspect of accommodation). The chapter on discipleship (chap. 7) will help you understand what should be produced if you have a biblically faithful curriculum. The chapter on curriculum (chap. 19) will help the reader understand what is meant by a well-developed curriculum (whereas, this chapter focused on the biblical content). The chapter on evaluation (chap. 23) will help the reader evaluate the ministry so that it can become more effective in delivering God's message. If we claim to have the greatest message on earth, we should pursue the most effective methodologies for promoting that message.

Clarifications and Qualifications

It is possible that one might read more into what is affirmed here than is intended, so a few clarifications and qualifications are in order. First, to say that the Bible is curriculum is not to say that one should have a curriculum that is only about content. It is because of the church's relationship to God that the Bible is emphasized. Thus, this approach is a God-centered approach, which secondarily and necessarily requires a focus on God's message.

Also, in theological terminology, God is a Person, and humans are persons in a derivative sense. Thus biblical teaching is about persons and for persons. Therefore, this approach, if executed properly, is also highly relational. If a so-called biblical curriculum is not relational, then it is not consistently biblical.

In addition, the goal of the Bible as curriculum is transformation. The Bible points people to a transformational relationship with God. These transformed people relate to their community in a transformative way. Thus, this approach, if executed properly, also has a community focus. Communicating content is absolutely crucial, but a biblical curriculum is far more than communicating content. It is communicating content while building biblical relationships so that it transforms people and reaches into the church's broader community.

Second and similarly, the goal of teaching the Bible is not mere knowledge. The Bible itself teaches that knowledge puffs up and love builds up (1 Cor 8:1). Thus, when teaching the Bible, one should

THE BIBLE AS CURRICULUM

aim at transforming the whole person through the power and message of God. The aim of biblical teaching is to produce Christians who are doers and not hearers only (Jas 1:22-27).

Third, although teaching the Bible is often associated with use of monologues (whether sermon or lecture), the servant of God should be creative in communicating the Bible. In the Bible we have far more examples of Jesus' dialogues than we do of His monologues. We also find the biblical authors using a variety of literary genres including dramatic narratives and extensive passages of poetry (the OT prophets wrote in Hebrew poetic form; the Psalms are all poetry as are most of Job and the Song of Songs). If one is consistent with the way the Bible teaches, then one will not restrict oneself to one approach to communicating the biblical message.

Fourth, one should not conclude that the slave motif, the motif that is emphasized here, is the only way to view one's relationship to God. This motif was chosen for this chapter because it is clearly biblical and because it emphasized duty, a concept that is in short supply in contemporary culture, even contemporary Christian culture.¹⁷ In addition, it provides a valuable example of using a concept (that of slave) that is "alien" to contemporary culture in a way that is at the same time relevant to a contemporary audience. One should not conclude that the biblically faithful curriculum is only about duty and restrictions. As our Lord has said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The Bible calls us to be His servants, and in His service we find true freedom.

The Church's Message and Image—Revisited

This chapter has argued that the nature of Scripture (i.e., that it is the revelation of God), and the nature of God's servants (i.e., that servants of God have a duty to submit themselves to God and His message), when combined, lead one to the conclusion that the curriculum of the church should be faithfully biblical. This chapter also

¹⁷ George Barna, in generalizing from findings from a nationwide survey of more than 4,000 people, stated, "It appears that most Americans like the security and the identity of the label 'Christian' but resist the biblical responsibilities that are associated with that identification." See "Commitment to Christianity Depends on How It Is Measured," *The Barna Update*, November 8, 2005 [online]. Accessed 23 July 2007. Available from <http://www.barna.org>; Internet.

considered the need for the church to accommodate the way it packages this message in order to be more winsome to the community, but it concludes that the message itself is not negotiable. The implications of these insights for educational ministry were then briefly explored. To state this in other terms, educational institutions are known for their particular approach to curriculum, and every church should be known by its focus on the Bible as curriculum.

In revisiting the beginning illustration, one might observe that the church consultant was right in saying that the church cannot *not* communicate, for everything the church does and says will create an image for the church before the watching community. The consultant was also right in saying that once the church's message is chosen, everything else follows. What the church consultant and the staff failed to say, or at least failed to say clearly, is that the church's message and core image had already been chosen by God.

There are only two choices left to the church and its staff. The first choice is, Will they choose to obey God or join the long history of people who have chosen to disobey Him? There are actions the pastor and leaders on the church staff can take to bring people along in their thinking and to clarify the issues, but ultimately some will choose to obey, and some will choose to disobey. Those who choose to obey do have a second choice (or even a series of choices) to make. The second choice has to do with how the church's assigned message might be accommodated to reach and minister to those in the community. The ancient message is relevant, but the church must faithfully seek to communicate this ancient message in an appealing way to its contemporary audience.

From this message flows a beautiful and appealing image for every church. It communicates to the watching world that we love God and His message. It communicates that we wish to live humbly and consistently with all that this entails. It communicates that we love the people in our churches, in our communities, and throughout the world. It communicates that we love them enough to minister to their hurts, present to them the good news of Christ, and train those who believe to follow in obedience. This message and image may result in aesthetically pleasing or plain buildings. It may result in a variety of musical styles. This commitment may be expressed in

monologues, dialogues, poetry, or drama. It may produce a variety of ministries depending on the community in which God has placed the church. It may produce a homeless shelter, a school, a medical clinic, a support group ministry, a recreation ministry, a counseling center, a camp ministry, or a job fair. Yet whatever collection of ministries and ministry styles that are selected, the choices must first begin by embracing the Bible as the church's canon (i.e., measuring stick) for preaching, teaching, and ministry. Varied ministries may be developed, but they must flow from this core commitment.

The church has the authority to make these decisions, but it has no authority to change God's assigned message and thus to change its core image. Even if some wander from the message, they do not truly change it, for God's message is unchangeable. For as the prophet Isaiah declared, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever" (Isa 40:8; see also 1 Pet 1:24-25). In what more important and valuable message can one invest one's life?

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by the statement that the church "cannot *not* communicate," and what exactly does this have to do with intentionally designing the educational ministry of the church?
2. How does one's view of the Bible influence how one thinks about the educational mission and ministry of the church?
3. How does one seeing oneself and other church members as "the servants of God" influence how one thinks about the educational ministry of the church?
4. How do you judge something as biblical or not biblical? Do you go with your intuitions? Do you look to your spiritual mentors? Do you judge whether it agrees with your theology? Do you look to your favorite authors? Are you skillful enough in understanding the Bible so that you can carefully discern for yourself? If so, how? What do you think of the thought experiment suggested by the author of this chapter?
5. How should Paul's reference to accommodation (1 Cor 9:19-23) influence how we see the educational ministry as it attempts to minister to various groups?

6. What can be learned about accommodation by studying the differences in how Jesus presented the gospel in John 3 and 4?
7. What can be learned about accommodation by studying the differences in how Paul addressed believers in his letters and the pagan philosophers in Acts 17:16-31?
8. How did Jesus and Paul stay faithful to God's message while packaging this message to different audiences?

Bibliography

- Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilder Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Charles, Daryl J. "Paul before the Areopagus: Reflections on the Apostle's Encounter with Cultured Paganism." *Philosophia Christi* 7 (2005): 125-40.
- "Commitment to Christianity Depends on How It Is Measured." *The Barna Update*, November 8, 2005 [online]. Accessed 23 July 2007. Available from <http://www.barna.org>; Internet.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998.
- _____. *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002.
- Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper Collins, Inc., 1978; reprint, Peabody, MA: Prince, 2004.
- Lewis, Gordon R., and Bruce A. Demarest. *Integrative Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
- Louw, Johannes, and Eugene Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Vol. 1. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.
- Moroney, Stephen K. *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000.
- Saury, Robert L. "Which Books Belong in the Bible?" In *Understanding Christian Theology*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Chapter 7

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

Margaret Lawson

We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom,
so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

(Col 1:28)

What Is a Disciple?

I often begin my classes by posing a question to focus the students on the topic to follow. One such question is, What would be different in your church if every single person were living and operating according to the principles that Jesus taught His disciples? We always have such good discussion about a worshipping, serving, fellowshiping, baptizing, loving congregation where lost people are being won to Christ on a daily basis. Then I ask, "Is your church like that?" After the obvious silence, I ask them to suggest reasons why it is not. The answer inevitably comes back to the one word—*discipleship*. What about your church? Is it made up of converts or disciples? And is there a difference?

The difference is found in the challenge in the Great Commission to make disciples and teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. It is not just the first part of the sentence that is important. Making disciples is sometimes seen as different from making converts, but that is not what Jesus taught. According to Jesus' teaching, there was no difference at all between disciples and converts because when He called men and women to follow Him, He called them to count the cost and abandon all else if they wanted to follow Him (Luke 9:23). He did not consider that becoming a fully committed follower was

an option to be added to the salvation package. It is not like buying a car and making a choice about whether to add the extras like a spoiler or gold rims. It was an all-or-nothing decision. He made clear that it could cost them everything they had and it would cost some of them their lives. They were *obedient* to His teaching.

In reality, for many today the call to follow Christ is to repent and trust Him for salvation. The concept of lordship is left for some other time and some other place. According to Bonhoeffer, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth that has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. . . . There is trust in God, but no following of Christ."¹ He further makes the distinction between *cheap grace* and *costly grace*. By cheap grace he means "the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything they say, and so everything can remain as it was before." Costly grace in contrast recognizes that the ultimate reward of discipleship is to be like Jesus, conformed to His image (Rom 8:29). In the meantime we are exhorted to be imitators of Christ, in both attitude and action (Eph 5:1; 1 Cor 4:16–17).²

Several definitions follow, all of which embody the same principles expressed in a variety of words. One description is a guiding statement for discipleship materials produced by LifeWay publishers. It states, "Discipleship is a lifelong journey of obedience to Christ which transforms a person's values and behavior, and results in ministry in one's home, church, and in the world."³ So a disciple is one whose life has been radically changed, and whose lifestyle makes that evident. The idea of transformation is reiterated by Barina who says:

We might define discipleship as becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ. It is about the intentional training of people who voluntarily submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ and who want to become imitators of Christ in every thought, word, and deed. On the basis of teaching, training, experiences, relationships and account-

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 64.

² *Ibid.*

³ B. Sneed and R. Edgemon, *Transformational Discipleship* (Nashville: LifeWay, 1999), 3.

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

109

ability, we become transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.⁴

Through the process of discipleship, the individual becomes transformed or changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This change is described in terms that are akin to metamorphosis in nature. The verb in Rom 12:2 is *metamorphoo*,⁵ and Paul uses this same word when he urges the believers in Rome to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom 12:2). According to the dictionary this metamorphosis is "a change in the form and the habits of an animal during normal development after the embryonic stage—from the Latin *metamorphosis*, from the Greek *metamorphoun*, to transform."⁶ It describes the way a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly.

A second dictionary meaning is a "marked change in appearance, character, condition, or function." This provides an excellent descriptive analogy of the new believer in Christ. The apostle Paul says, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come" (2 Cor 5:17).

Dallas Willard prefers the term *spiritual formation* and explains the change and growth in Christ as "the process of shaping our spirit and giving it definite character. It means the formation of our spirit in conformity with the Spirit of Christ. . . . The focus of spiritual formation is the formation of our spirit."⁷ Just as the change from chrysalis to butterfly is gradual, so is the making of a disciple. Paul says, "For we all, with unveiled faces, are reflecting the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:17–18, emphasis mine).

Sometimes new believers are mistakenly led to believe that all their problems will be over if they make the decision to follow Christ. Disillusionment follows when this proves not to be the case. On other occasions new believers are not encouraged to move beyond that immediate life-changing decision and simply told that all they have to do is accept Christ as Savior. As important as it is, the

⁴ Barina, *Growing True Disciples* (Ventura: Issachar Resources, 2000), 20.

⁵ Thayer and Smith, Greek Lexicon entry for *Metamorphoo*, *The New Testament Greek Lexicon*, <http://www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3339>.

⁶ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/metamorphosis>.

⁷ D. Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 53.

decision is not the final destination. It is the beginning of an exciting journey through hills and valleys, twists and turns toward a glorious end that is always in view.

The Disciple's Journey

No one knows exactly when the journey will end, but the journey itself is the immediate challenge. Jesus said clearly and decisively, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). He did not sugarcoat the seriousness of the cost. He also told the rich young ruler that if he was not willing to turn his back on all his earthly wealth, he could not be a follower of Jesus (Luke 18:22). Jesus made even more radical demands for the disciple in determining priorities: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). The disciple must be prepared to make a total commitment of all he is and all he possesses. Jesus was not trying to discourage His followers, but He wanted them to make the decision for the right reason. He gave them His word that however great the demands or difficult the journey, the disciple would not be alone. In the final analysis Jesus promised, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

An academic discussion of the disciple life is easy. It is actually much easier to talk about than it is to practice the life of holiness. Jesus both taught and modeled for His disciples what He expected of them, and He did it over a period of time. It was not through a lecture or a six-week course. It was lived out in the nitty-gritty of life with all of its challenges. Nowhere in the New Testament is the idea found that the Christian life is easy. Somewhere the message has been twisted into what Dallas Willard terms "The Great Omission."⁸ He says, "The missing note in evangelical life today is not in the first instance spirituality but rather obedience. We have generated a variety of religion to which obedience is not regarded as an essential."

If we know the beginning and we know the end, a description of the journey of obedience is also important. If our churches are to be

nurturing fully devoted followers of Christ, there must be some instructions to follow.

Jesus' Pattern for Discipling

Jesus had a great deal to say about what it takes to be a disciple. Sometimes His followers understood and sometimes they did not, but He did not lower the standard. From the first Sermon on the Mount to His final dramatic teaching in the form of a living sermon on servanthood, as He washed His disciples' feet, He explained it to them. He raised the bar high. Sometimes His followers succeeded and sometimes they failed, but always He lifted them up and taught them again. Some Christians today would prefer to lower the standard to fit their busy and complicated lifestyles rather than changing their living to achieve the goal. Jesus explains how to reach the goal of Christlikeness.

Lessons from the Vine

One memorable metaphor that Jesus used to express the relationship of the disciple to the Master was that of abiding in the vine. Following the last supper and His announcement that He was going back to the Father, they all left the upper room. Jesus and His disciples passed through vineyards, and here He gave what we know as the "Vine Discourse." Through this metaphor, He explained the relationship of the branch to the vine. He spoke of the advantages of remaining connected to the vine and the consequences for those who did not. He also introduced the idea of pruning and trimming the branches to encourage increased production of fruit.

Jesus explained the concept of abiding or remaining attached to the vine in terms that His disciples would understand and indicated that the result of this relationship would allow them to be recognized as disciples. He described several ways this relationship could be maintained. Some have described these as the marks, the characteristics, or the disciplines of the disciple. Whatever you choose to call them, they ought to be present in the life of the maturing disciple. However, these disciplines will not by themselves produce spiritual growth. There is no magic formula that implies that if I do these things I will mature. It is the connectedness to the vine that produces

⁸ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 44.

these disciplines. Through practicing the disciplines, we enjoy a rich relationship with Christ, the living vine. Christ lives His life through us; we do not mold ourselves to be like Him. We focus on Him, and He produces growth and fruit in us.

The Marks of a Disciple

The characteristics Jesus requires of disciples are not those gifts that we bring to the table with us. Jesus demonstrated that by calling unlearned and seemingly insignificant men to be His disciples. He chose them "warts and all." He did not pick them because of what they were when He found them, but He saw their potential. He selected them because of what they could become when they allowed Him to transform their lives. What were the characteristics they were to learn as they developed into His likeness? Following are some characteristics from Jesus' analogy that provide a basis for the new life in Christ.⁹

Stay Connected to the Vine

The main characteristic of a devoted follower of Christ, according to Jesus' words in John 15, is that they "remain" in the vine. The King James Version uses the word *abide*. Jesus used several forms of the Greek word *meno*. It means "to stay, stand fast, stay where you are, not stir, or to remain as before."¹⁰ A disciple who wishes to grow in his relationship with the Lord should stay connected to Him, the vine. Jesus expanded His explanation to the disciples as if to make certain they understood His meaning, by saying, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:5). At this time, so close to His death, He wanted His disciples to be sure of both the requirement and the result of remaining connected to Him. If they stayed properly connected to Him, they would bear fruit. The evidence of abiding or remaining in the vine is fruitfulness. The branch that is in Christ has all that is necessary to become fruitful.¹¹ Fruit is not limited to soul-winning. In this context love and

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

joy and answered prayer are mentioned too (John 15:7,11,12). Other passages, such as Gal 5:22-24 and 1 Pet 1:5-8, describe additional fruit.¹²

Pruning the Branches

There are also consequences for the branch that does not bear fruit. Jesus refers to two types of pruning, separating and cutting back branches. Fruit-bearing branches are sometimes cut back to promote growth and more fruit. Branches that do not bear fruit are cut off and burned and no longer enjoy the life-giving sustenance from the vine. The branches that bear fruit bring glory to the Father.

Jesus' emphasis on the life of sacrifice and pruning might give the impression to some that the Christian life is a series of hardships and pain. Although difficulties may be encountered along the way, there are also the joy and peace that come from living the new life in Christ in the present. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). The abundant life is found in living in a daily relationship to Jesus.

Now we will turn our attention to some marks of obedient disciples that help in developing in the believer the life of fruitfulness and abundance.

Prayer with Purpose

Remaining attached to the vine indicates a relationship. A connecting link in the vertical relationship between the believer and the Father is the discipline of prayer, and it defines a Christian's walk with God. The prayer life that characterizes the Christian is what Paul describes as "praying without ceasing" or praying constantly (1 Thess 5:17). We cannot spend all our time on our knees, but we can have a prayerful attitude at all times. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and He taught them. More than that, He showed them. He modeled the life of prayer Himself when He drew aside regularly in the midst of the busyness of everyday life to spend time with His Father. He modeled it in His life and taught the principles to His disciples. Prayer is foundational to all other spiritual disciplines and is much more than a religious ritual. As the disciple

⁹ Additional sources are listed in the bibliography with particular reference to this topic in R. Foster, D. Willard, T. W. Hunt, and G. Barna.

¹⁰ Sneed and Edgemom, *Transformed Discipleship*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² Notes on John 15:5, *NIV Life Application Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1775.

responds to Him in prayer, Jesus molds and shapes him into His image.

A Love for the Word

A vital component of a growing relationship with the Lord is time spent in Bible study, both corporately and individually. Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, you really are My disciples" (John 8:31). The Bible study hour or small-group time ought to provide opportunities for the disciple to hear God speak from His Word. In our churches today sometimes the tendency is to leave the "study" part to the expert, the pastor, and allow him to tell listeners what it says. Listening actively and learning from appropriate preaching and teaching are important, but so is personal study. Developing an intimate relationship with others involves spending time with them and learning how they think, feel, and act. A love for Christ is indicated by a love for His Word and by developing habits of reading, studying, meditating on it, and committing it to memory. Most of all it involves living it out and acting according to the principles learned and internalized. Just as Jesus applied the Word in His daily living, as when He responded to Satan in the desert, so we ought to follow His example. We are not to be a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does (Jas 1:25).

Fellowship with Other Believers

Horizontal relationships flow naturally from the vertical relationship with the Father. Discipleship that does not evidence itself in relationships with other believers is limited in its scope. Some would even consider that it is not true discipleship at all. Jesus said it eloquently: "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

In *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth*, Dr. Gene Mims asserts that fellowship is a companion to evangelism, discipleship, and ministry. He says, "Fellowship is more than just a feeling of goodwill in a congregation. Fellowship is the intimate spiritual relationship that Christians share with God and other believers through their relationship with Jesus Christ."¹³ The love the disciples shared with one an-

THE DISCIPLE CALLED TO LEARN

other is part of what made Christ's message so attractive and fruitful and provides an example for us to follow.

Witness to the Lost

Relationships with others are not limited to association with other believers. Witnessing Christians are those who have experienced an event with such impact that they have to tell others about it. Too often witnessing or evangelism is perceived as a requirement or a duty and it becomes a burden. In Acts 2:42 believers spread the word of the gospel with joy. The Great Commission requires that believers are all to be involved in the disciple-making process. Acts 1:8 explains how it is to be done. Part of equipping believers as disciples is to provide them with the skills and the opportunities to practice telling the story so others may be won to Christ.

Ministry and Service

The last act that Jesus carried out before His return to the Father was to wash the disciples' feet. This was not to institute foot-washing as a practice in the church but to teach a principle. He was introducing the most difficult of all concepts to the disciples, and perhaps that is why He left it to the last. What He modeled for them was servanthood, and He said it was to show them the full extent of His love. As He commissioned them to go to all nations with the message of the gospel, He modeled for them the means by which the mission would be accomplished.

Ministry and service are for all believers, not just for the paid staff. It is also important for church leaders to recognize the need for each person to participate in the ministry of the church early on. Some churches have introduced an assimilation process for new members that helps them identify their gifts and matches them up with appropriate ministries in the church. Jesus said the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve others (Mark 10:45).

Obedience

A growing involvement in these disciplines characterizes a fully devoted follower of Christ. The thread that runs through them all is the mark of obedience. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commands" (John 14:15). Obedience is not a visible mark, but it is

¹³ G. Mims, *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2001), 45.

exhibited in such disciplines as those noted above. Obedience is not a suggestion; it is a command for the disciple. The necessary ingredient for abiding in the vine is obedience (John 15:10).

Robert Mulholland stresses that obedience to the disciplines is not something we do to assist in our being conformed to the likeness of Christ. They are the result of our *being* and not our *doing*.¹⁴ He says, "Spiritual formation is relational or being oriented rather than functional or doing oriented. Spiritual formation is a loving relationship with God that shapes our being rather than being a technique or method or program for self-improvement."¹⁵ Obedience to Christ and abiding in Him is to allow Him to work in us. He set the example for us by going to the cross in obedience, and His call is to follow Him.

The Disciples Carried the Flame

After Pentecost the disciples increased in number and spread out carrying the message that reflected Jesus' teaching. Paul particularly, and other New Testament writers as well, used several analogies to explain to the people of the day what it meant to be a disciple in the fullest sense of the word. Jesus told them that He would return, and the early Christians highly anticipated His coming. They were exhorted to live their lives daily in the expectation that Jesus would soon return, and Paul wanted them to know how to live. Many of these pictures paint for us the requirements for "followership" or discipleship, and they related closely to the audience of the culture. The message is also clear for readers today.

In 1 Cor 3-4 Paul used three images: First he described some of the believers as "mere infants" (1 Cor 3:1), whose immaturity had led to divisions and quarreling within the church. He urged them on to more mature behavior that required solid food and not milk. He also described a building being built up out of stone. The foundation stone is all important, and the materials must be of the best quality. Anything else would not have lasting value or stand the test of fire in the final day. The third image is that of a seed's being planted, watered, and cultivated to grow up to bear fruit. Paul also asserts

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

117

that many people may be involved in the process of growing the seed to maturity, and the application follows that God may use whom He chooses to assist in the maturing of the believer. Through each picture he described the growth of the disciple toward maturity in Christ.

On another occasion Paul used three different images: the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer (2 Tim 2:4-6). He frequently alluded to the process of disciplined training for the future ahead. He said, "I *press toward the goal* for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14, emphasis mine).

Each of these analogies illustrates progress in Christian living. Becoming a disciple is not an event that can be documented and written on a calendar although that is where the process begins with the new birth. It is clear from Scripture that discipleship is initiated when a person accepts Christ but continues throughout life as the individual grows and matures. T. W. Hunt described it as developing the mind of Christ,¹⁶ and Paul says, "Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). We are not merely to resemble Christ; we are to think His very thoughts.¹⁷

Developing disciples is not a solo effort. Paul describes the purpose of growing in Christ within the context of the church when he writes that the task is "to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).¹⁸ He expresses a similar idea in Col 1:28-29 where he says our purpose in teaching is "so that we may present everyone mature in Christ." It is our responsibility to grow toward maturity ourselves, as disciples and leaders; but we, as leaders, are also responsible for the spiritual growth of others. The church can plan specific learning experiences to assist the process. As educators we are given the unique opportunity of partnering with the Holy Spirit in His supernatural work of making disciples. Therefore, leaders in the church who are to assist in the process of developing disciples ought to have a plan in place.

Planning for Discipleship in the Local Church

Although a great deal of the responsibility for spiritual formation is the task of the individual, the church provides the community

¹⁴ M. R. Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), 114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ T. W. Hunt, *The Mind of Christ* (Nashville: LifeWay, 1994).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ For more on training in the context of the church, see chapter 18.

context as the arena in which the believer finds and participates in body life. Chapter 8, "The Church's Role in Teaching," elaborates on this concept. The local church is able to plan and provide discipleship experiences that facilitate the journey of the individual.

A number of patterns exist for equipping church members through discipleship. Many church Web sites present a successful strategy that works for their church, and while many of these may suggest ideas, there is no "one size fits all" approach.¹⁹ Among the varied approaches to engaging disciples in growth-oriented learning, the best approach is one you design for your own location and situation. Some common elements may be found in all effective discipleship systems, and these may be helpful as a starting point. The university model works well for some churches, with courses offered along tracks for different levels of spiritual maturity. Members are guided through a series of courses or classes that help them move on to the next level. Mentoring is another process, where an individual is matched with a more mature Christian and they arrange to study and pray together. The well-known proponent of this method is Waylon Moore,²⁰ and he bases his plan on 2 Tim 2:2. Other church leaders frequently prefer a small-group approach, such as the *MasterLife* series authored by Avery Willis, or *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby. Yet another common approach is to offer a "smorgasbord" of courses based on popular interest. Sometimes these groups choose to study the most recently released product on the market, but this approach does not always offer a "balanced diet."

Church leaders who desire to involve a large number of members in the discipling experience would do well to consider a variety of approaches to reach the most people. Some people respond well to one-on-one mentoring while others flourish in the small group as they interact with others. The ingredient common to all the approaches is "accountability." As disciples, we are accountable first to God and then to one another. The goal of accountability is to provide honest feedback, affirmation, and support in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and acceptance. Each church decides what type of discipleship approach is best for their people. The important factor

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

119

is that the approach to discipling individuals ought to be intentional and should keep in mind the ultimate goal of producing mature followers of Jesus Christ.

Steps to Planning Intentional Discipleship Experiences

A simple plan follows to provide opportunities for Christians to grow in their faith, and many variations exist. The following are steps for leaders to consider:

1. Understand the purpose of discipleship.
2. Recognize your church possibilities.
3. Determine needs and interests of the people.
4. Provide qualified leaders.
5. Plan and offer discipleship experiences.
6. Evaluate the process.

Step 1. Understand the Purpose of Discipleship

The first consideration is recognition of the goal to be achieved by discipling believers. Some years ago the goal was to have a training program, but churches have moved away from this to a more purpose-driven approach. Two questions are crucial: What is the desired outcome in the life of the individual and in the life of the church? At what level of maturity are they currently? When the goal is clarified, it is easier to provide experiences that will help each individual move in that direction. The pastor and staff or leaders who are excited about personal spiritual growth and model it in their daily living will be able to motivate their church members by example.

Step 2. Recognize the Church's Potential for Developing Disciples

Important concerns are such items as the ages of the church members, the potential for leaders, space available, and times for meetings. To have a finger on the pulse of the church and a concept of the "spiritual temperature" will guide concerning when to introduce activities and encourage people to become involved. Some churches would respond well to a program and a specified time of meeting. The varied lifestyles and life patterns of the members may lead to a variety of times and venues for meeting. The leaders need to determine the potential for interest before moving forward. A small

¹⁹ Willow Creek, Saddleback, FBC Springdale, AR, and Pantego Bible Church are a few examples of churches with intentional discipleship courses.

²⁰ W. Moore, see www.mentoring-disciples.org.

church, with the pastor as the only staff person, might begin by working with one or two individuals.

Step 3. Determine the Spiritual Growth Needs and Interests of the People

Everyone needs to be disciplined, so let's begin a program for everyone. The truth is that not all believers know they ought to continue to grow toward maturity. A survey is one way to gauge the interest of the members; perhaps another is to talk with Sunday school teachers and members. Jesus began with the needs of people in His ministry, and the same approach is appropriate for churches today. Based on the needs in the church, the areas for growth may be determined and training offered. Some churches now require all new members to go through a period of training, and continuing discipleship groups would be the natural follow up to that. Ready-made target groups are new believers (and new church members), regular members, and leaders (and potential leaders).

Step 4. Provide Qualified Leaders

A first stage in turning disciples into leaders may consist of a few selected potential leaders who would be able to lead groups after a period of training. Sometimes another church, an association, or a state agency is able to provide initial training for leaders. Those who lead small groups for the purposes of discipleship should be trained in the necessary skills. Preferably, they should have participated in groups themselves, to gain experience, so as to provide positive experiences for the participants.

Step 5. Plan and Offer Discipleship Experiences

It is impossible to disciple everyone during the short time people are in Sunday school classes, and yet we live in an age when people have less and less time to spend at church. In small closed groups people can study and learn together how to be disciples. Learning experiences should be made available at times people are able to attend. Sometimes a group is enlisted for a study, and the members then decide on a time of meeting. New Christians might be involved in a study of basic Christian disciplines and doctrine. Others may study and discover their spiritual gifts. More mature believers might

be directed to a group study like *The Mind of Christ*²¹ or *Spirit of the Disciplines*.²² Leaders might engage in a study of *Jesus on Leadership* as they grow in their understanding of servant leadership.²³ Many courses are available to engage people at a variety of levels of maturity. Web sites such as Navigators²⁴ and LifeWay Discipleship,²⁵ among others, provide introductions to resources and offer planning guides²⁶ for implementing discipleship in the local church. Among the plethora of discipleship materials readily available, the choices that church leaders make intentionally will help to challenge believers to new levels of maturity.

Step 6. Evaluate

Chapter 23 is devoted entirely to evaluation of the total church program, but evaluation is also essential for individual programs. The purposes outlined and the goals set at the outset of the program provide the guidelines for evaluation. Annual planning and evaluation will enable the church leaders to provide ongoing discipleship experiences that spur people on. In the words of the apostle Paul, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing" (1 Thess 5:11).

Return to the Class

Do you remember the question I ask my students at the beginning of class? We envisage a church filled with believers who worship with joy, study the Bible, evangelize, serve, and contribute selflessly to building up the church body. Does this church really exist anywhere? No, unfortunately not, in its completed and perfect form. As each disciple is always "being transformed," so it is with a body of believers. Spiritual transformation is a continuing process and each disciple plays a part in the whole. A church that is alive and vibrant is one in which the believers understand and are excited about being in a process of change. Paul said it well: "We are God's children now,

²¹ T. W. Hunt, *The Mind of Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 1994).

²² D. Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

²³ C. Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998).

²⁴ Navigators, www.navigators.org.

²⁵ LifeWay Discipleship, www.lifeway.com.

²⁶ "Discipleship, Administrative Planning Guide" is available as a download on www.lifeway.com.

and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him because we will see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How would you motivate church members to increase their interest in spiritual growth?
2. How does the personal spiritual walk of the pastor or other leaders influence the spiritual maturity of church members?
3. What suggestions would you make to a pastor who asked you how to develop members of the church in practical spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and personal Bible study?
4. Evaluate your church bulletin and newsletter on its promotion of spiritual development among members. Does this means of promotion assist in motivating people to spiritual growth? What other methods could you use?
5. Describe your image of a maturing Christian.

Bibliography

- Barna, George. *Growing True Disciples*. Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. New York: HarperCollins, 1954.
- Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988.
- _____. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Langel, Kenneth O., and James C. Wilhoit, eds. *The Christian Educator's Handbook of Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.
- Lanks, Billie, and William A. Shell, eds. *Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.
- Lunt, T. W. *The Mind of Christ*. Nashville: B&H, 1994.
- Fulholland, M. Robert, Jr. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map to Spiritual Formation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993.
- _____. *Shaped by the Word*. Nashville: Upper Room, 2000.

THE DISCIPLE: CALLED TO LEARN

- Sneed, Barry, and Roy Edgemon. *Transformational Discipleship*. Nashville: LifeWay, 1999.
- Willard, Dallas. *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.
- _____. *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.
- Williams, Steve, and Craig Beall. *Discipleship That Makes a Difference*. SBTc, www.sbtexas.com, 2005.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

Margaret Lawson

"I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in Me through their message.

May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You.

May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me."

(John 17:20-21)

An Introduction to Pictures of the Church

Often in sermons or songs, we hear the church spoken of as the body of Christ. We sing, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God," or sometimes we use a term such as *the bride of Christ*. What exactly do we mean by these concepts? In my teaching ministry classes, I usually ask the students to draw a diagram of what they understand by the concept *the church*. What would you draw? If we were to compare the drawings, it is unlikely that any two would be exactly the same. If a child drew a picture, it would probably be a building; perhaps with a steeple. When the students explain their "artwork," we see a variety of interpretations. Some draw people of all ages holding hands, and some illustrate the concept with a cross in a circle, and some draw a complicated theological concept. If I have 30 students, 30 different conceptions are portrayed. Usually all are correct. Each one is a different aspect of the same idea, and it would take a combination of all of them to give representative picture.

How different from the concepts presented in my class would be the picture that is painted in Scripture? There is variety there too,

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

125

and the New Testament portrays many analogies. Think for a moment of the vivid metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ, ready for her bridegroom and eagerly awaiting His coming (Eph 5:22-31). The church is also seen as God's new creation (2 Cor 5:17) or is described as a fellowship of faith with its members described as the saints (1 Cor 1:2), the faithful (Col 1:2), the witnesses (John 15:26-27), or the household of God (1 Pet 4:17).¹ Each of these images suggests plurality and indicates relationships. The bride, or fellowship, or saints, or household of faith points to the relationships within the church. Just as we respond in faith to the gospel as individuals, we work out our faith in the context of relationships in the church and in the world. Jesus explains what those relationships should look like when He says, "May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us" (John 17:21).

The Church Finds Identity in Community: A Picture of the Godhead

One formal definition of the local church is found in a document produced by the Great Commission Council of the Southern Baptist Convention. It reads:

A church is a community of called-out believers. The word for church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. This Greek term was also used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word in the Old Testament that referred to the nation of Israel assembled before God. The picture is of the people of God under His divine rule and called out for God's mission.²

This same term *church* in the New Testament most frequently refers to a fellowship of baptized believers. They are characterized as those who have willingly associated with one another in the faith and fellowship (*koinonia*) of the gospel. They are committed to Christ's

¹ "Church," *Holman Christian Standard Bible Dictionary*, online <http://lifeway.com/crossmain.asp>.

² M. Maynard, comp., *We're Here for the Churches* (Nashville: Great Commission Council of the Southern Baptist Convention, LifeWay Christian Resources, 1999), 10.

teachings and are seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.³

Scripture also speaks of the church as the body of Christ, which includes the redeemed of all the ages.⁴ The *Holman Bible Dictionary* states:

The Greek term was used more than one hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use in the time of Jesus. The Hebrew term (*qahal*) meant simply "assembly" and could be used in a variety of ways, referring for example to an assembling of prophets (1 Sam 19:20), soldiers (Num 22:4), or the people of God (Deut 9:10).⁵

The reference to the church as the people of God in the Old Testament holds significance for understanding the term in the New Testament. The early Christians were Jews who used the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. The use of the term *people of God* indicated their understanding of the continuity linking the Old and New Testaments. These Christians understood themselves as the people of the God who had revealed Himself in the Old Testament (Heb 1:1-2), as the true children of Israel (Rom 2:28-29), and as the people of the new covenant prophesied in the Old Testament (Heb 8:1-13). They undoubtedly recognized themselves as constituting a church, and they perceived themselves as called out by God in Jesus Christ for a special purpose (Eph 2:19).⁶

From the beginning, the church understood that they were a people of community. The concept of community and family was common to the culture of the time, as it is in many contexts still today. The church was born out of the community of relationships that began before the beginning of time, taking her identity from the true God.

In *Community 101*, Gilbert Bilezikian points out that community finds its essence and definition deep within the being of God. The first three verses in Genesis reveal that God is a community of three

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Harold S. Songer, "Church," *Holman Bible Dictionary*, online.

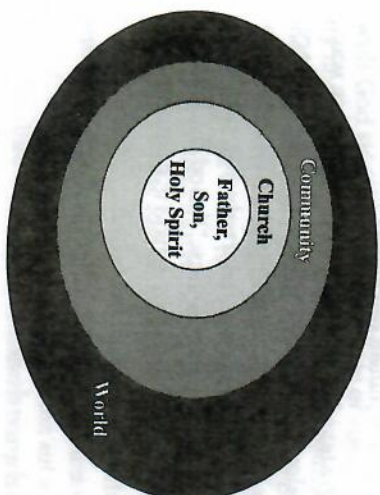
⁶ Ibid.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

127

persons in one being.⁷ He further asserts that "God, although one being, is eternally three persons within oneness. He values community supremely because he experiences the dynamics and the synergy of three in one. Thus when he creates in his image, he creates community."⁸

The church exists within the context of community and grows and ministers through relationship with the community. The church



looks inward to find its identity and looks outward to exert its influence. This could be depicted by the ever-increasing circles in the diagram at left.

John 17 is often called the high priestly prayer or the prayer for the church. Here Jesus prays for

the disciples whom He is soon to leave and prays also for those who will come after them. Just before His crucifixion, He prayed: "May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21). Jesus described His relationship with the Father in terms of oneness (John 10:30) and offered us the same kind of relationship with Him and with one another. Christ's pattern for unity with the Father is a pattern for us to display and enjoy in the church. Without Christian unity, the world will have little respect for our witness. "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

From the beginning of the Bible, God teaches us that community and family are the ideal. The concept is amplified in the creation of man.

⁷ G. Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 16.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

God created a being in his own image and then he astoundingly declared his creation to be "not good" because it was solitary. God was displeased with the fact that the man was alone (Gen 2:18). There was one solitary individual but he had no oneness because there was no one else with whom he could be together in oneness. Therefore, the creation in his image required the creation of a plurality of persons. God's supreme achievement was not the creation of a solitary man, but the creation of human community.⁹

The only reason given in the text for the creation of the woman was to help the man not to be alone. The woman was to be the necessary counterpart of the man for the making of community. Bilezikian continues, "Complete parity and mutuality are the irreducible conditions for the integrity of biblically defined community."¹⁰ God the Father teaches us not only by what He is but also by what He does. In summary, he says:

As noted above, community as God ordained it was not an incidental concern of his nor did it happen haphazardly as the serendipitously creative result of a transcendental cosmic brainstorm. Community is deeply grounded in the nature of God. It flows from who God is. Because he is community, he creates community. It is his gift of himself to humans.¹¹

The church looks inward to the Godhead to find the model for community and teaches by example. As members experience oneness and community in the life of the church, so they begin to live in community themselves and, in turn, model community for others.

According to the New Testament, the servant relationship that was lost in the garden at the fall is recovered in the new community. It becomes the hallmark of the way Christians relate to one another. In both church and family, the two communities of oneness generated by the redemptive ministry of Christ, the mode of interaction between its members is reciprocal servanthood and, therefore, mutual submission (Matt 20:25-28; Gal 5:13; Phil 2:3-8).¹²

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹² Ibid., 25.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

129

Therefore, the making of community is not to be regarded as an optional decision for Christians. It is a compelling and irrevocable necessity, a binding divine mandate for all believers at all times. It is possible for humans to reject or alter God's commission for them to build community and to betray His image in us; this cost is enormous since His image in us is the essential attribute that defines our own humanity.¹³ The survival and welfare of authentic community are dependent on the members of community being in communion with God since He is the Creator of community. Therefore, the quality and the viability of human communities vary in response to the members' willingness to accept their own dependency on God.¹⁴

Abram was the first to accept God's plan for him to spearhead the establishment of the new community that would eventually bring together, in the church, believers from all the peoples of the earth. When Christ the Redeemer came, through His ministry on earth He established an unshakable foundation for the building of God's new community.¹⁵

The Church Exists through Community:

A Picture of Fellowship

The operation of the church is founded on the concept of unity and is demonstrated through fellowship. The phrase "more caught than taught" is certainly applicable in this context. Members of the fellowship of saints experience fellowship, and then they contribute to it themselves. Many have reduced the word *fellowship* to mean little more than cookies and punch after the service. This idea is a *distortion* of biblical fellowship, which means mutual support and ministry to one another within the community.

The New Testament term for "fellowship," *koinonia*, appears in Acts 2:42. The believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers." The word means "to share in, to come into communion, to come into fellowship." It appears in our words communion and community.¹⁶ It is

¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ G. Mims, *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth* (Nashville: LifeWay Church Resources, 1994), 45.

a concept not to be taken lightly or for granted or held up as an ideal that we cannot attain. It is rather a reality created by God in Christ and a privilege in which we are invited to participate.¹⁷

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred for his faith in Christ, spoke out of personal pain when, before his death, he wrote:

It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.¹⁸

The church is bound together not with creeds or confessions, not with programs and ministries, but with a unity produced by the Holy Spirit. Our communal bond is driven by God's love for us and our love for Him and one another. Jesus declared, "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another" (John 13:34). The fulfillment of the Great Commission hinges on our fellowship as well as on our evangelistic efforts, our discipleship commitments, and our ministries. Paul urged his Ephesian readers to maintain fellowship "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us" (Eph 4:2-3).

Church: The Fellowship That Teaches

It is important to understand what the church is to be and to do but equally important to be aware of the *teaching role* that emerges from these concepts. What does it mean to be a teaching church? In curriculum design we talk of the overt and the covert curriculum. Some activities are taught intentionally, but much of teaching is what is caught, not taught. We teach through our example as we live out

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

our convictions daily. If I ask my students to reflect on a teacher who had an impact on their lives, they seldom remember anything the teacher taught, but they remember who the teacher was. Most often they remember the way he or she related to the students. It is not just what we know that counts but how we live it out in the context of daily life. On a larger scale this is what we need to see for the church, a collection of individuals, to live out the concept of "church" in the context of the world in which we live. It is a cliché, but true nonetheless, that people will never care how much we know until they know how much we care.

Fellowship defines and validates our identity as believers. Jesus said the world will know how much we love Him by the way we love one another. The conduct of members in society activates the witness of the church in the world.

That world is constantly undergoing change and forms the backdrop for the teaching church. Without the principle of fellowship in operation, churches find it difficult, if not impossible, to practice other essential functions of the church. Where the fellowship is fractured and tensions run high, churches will do little in evangelism, discipleship, ministry, or worship.¹⁹

The church also teaches through the activities that symbolize the unity of fellowship in the church, such as the Lord's Supper. The challenge to "examine oneself" is an opportunity to restore any rift in relationships that may exist. Immediately after Paul spoke of "fellowship" with Christ through participation in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16), he said, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for all of us share that one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Lord's Supper is a family fellowship event that we observe in remembrance of Him. It is a reminder of His eternal presence with the fellowship of believers until He comes. Mims says, "The church is blessed with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit convicts us of sins and makes us alive forever in Jesus. He gifts us to do ministry. He produces spiritual fruit to bind our lives together. He thus creates a church that is supernatural. If unity is absent from a local church,

¹⁷ D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ Mims, *Kingdom Principles*, 51.

the Holy Spirit is not in charge."²⁰ See chapter 5, "The Holy Spirit as Teacher," for more on this theme.

Fellowship is more than just a feeling of goodwill in a congregation. Fellowship is the intimate spiritual relationship that Christians share with God and other believers through their relationship with Jesus Christ. Fellowship is expressed in all activities in which church members are together. These include social occasions such as eating together and enjoying one another's company. Hospitality is an expression of Christian love and fellowship. So are business meetings in which the church together seeks the mind of Christ.²¹

Values are more caught than taught. This phrase is used so often that no one remembers who said it first, but it is certainly applicable in this context. The value placed on community and fellowship and the attitudes demonstrated through fellowship activities become the loudest teaching tools. Many of us cannot remember where we encountered reverence for the Lord and His church, but we certainly learned it, and we hold it dear still today. We learn to worship by being present in worship. We learn to pray by listening to others and joining in ourselves. We grow in maturity by working and worshipping alongside others who are on the same journey. Mims says the fellowship of the church provides an atmosphere in which believers can mature and be nourished. Without this fellowship and our accountability to the Lord and other believers, we might be tempted to live our lives apart from Him and apart from other believers.²²

A church that practices NT fellowship cares for its members and watches to see if they are drifting away from their commitments to Christ. The love of Christ moves us to help those in our number who struggle with needs of one kind or another. Fellowship is also expressed through acts of loving ministry and support to hurting members of the body. A good church fellowship watches over its members and ministers to them when needs arise. "Building relationships of interdependence, evangelizing the lost, and caring for one another are the hallmarks of the kingdom principle of fellowship."²³ *Koinonia* is expressed whenever the church is together as a family of faith and

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

133

love. Thus, the church expresses its fellowship as an integral part of other functions.

As believers direct their worship to God, they do so not only as individuals but as a body. Evangelizing either the community or the world is not done by one person but by partners in the gospel who call out the called, pray, and give. Discipleship is successful only as believers accept responsibility for discipling one another.²⁴

The Church Operates through Community: A Picture of the Body

The nature and purpose of the church form a necessary structure for ministry. While there are many models of how the church should be organized to do its work, all of them include the concept of relationships and groups. Just as Jesus conducted His ministry of training the disciples at times in smaller groupings of two or three and at other times in the larger group of 12, so the church is organized to do the same. There are times, such as worship, when we meet together "in large group" as a faith community. On other occasions we meet in small groups for Bible study or discipleship. Still other occasions call for meeting one on one. Just as it is impossible to be Christian outside the context of others, so it is impossible for the church to function without the interaction of relationships. While these groupings differ, performing different tasks, through these groupings intentional teaching takes place.

Total participation of all through the stewardship of each one's spiritual gifting is an essential trait of the community of oneness. The imposition of restrictions and exclusions to ministry on the basis of role structures inhibits the expansion of authentic community. From the very beginning, God ordained that the making and the growth of community be the shared responsibility of all members of the community.²⁵

The Church as Body

The picture painted by Paul in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 provides the biblical background for these small community groups

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹ Maynard, *We're Here for the Churches*, 16.

²² Mims, *Kingdom Principles*, 51.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Maynard, *We're Here for the Churches*, 16.

²⁵ Ibid., 27.

called "local churches." He presents the fellowship of these local groups through an analogy of the body in which every part has a purpose and none is to be regarded any more highly than another. "Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other" (1 Cor 12:24-25). Also, in Rom 12:5-6 Paul asserts, "In the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts." These gifts are employed through the ministry in open and closed groups and ministry teams.

All believers are gifted for some responsibility in the ministry of the church. Helping them find their places of service helps the church and the kingdom. God gives each person gifts, talents, natural abilities, and interests for His glory. Involving each individual enables churches to build the body of Christ and reach out to a dying world.²⁶

In *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren poses four questions: Why does the church exist? What are we to be as a church? What are we to do as a church? How are we to do it? Some believe the answer lies in innovation as the key to what the church should do, but Warren disagrees, saying, "It isn't our job to create the purposes of the church but to discover them."²⁷ The functions of the church are found in Scripture and generally include worship, evangelism, discipleship, ministry, and fellowship. Maria Harris in *Fashion Me a People* refers to the functions as *koinonia* (community), *leiturgia* (prayer), *didache* (teaching), *kerygma* (proclamation), and *diakonia* (ministry or service).²⁸ The well-known Saddleback model develops the functions of the church in the form of a baseball diamond titled the Life Development Process.²⁹ A visit to church Web sites provides interesting insights into how many models have been created to communicate the process.

As if to answer Warren's fourth question—How are we going to do it?—Gene Mims produced an administrative model that itself

²⁶ Mims, *Kingdom Principles*, 154.

²⁷ R. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 7.

²⁸ M. Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 64.

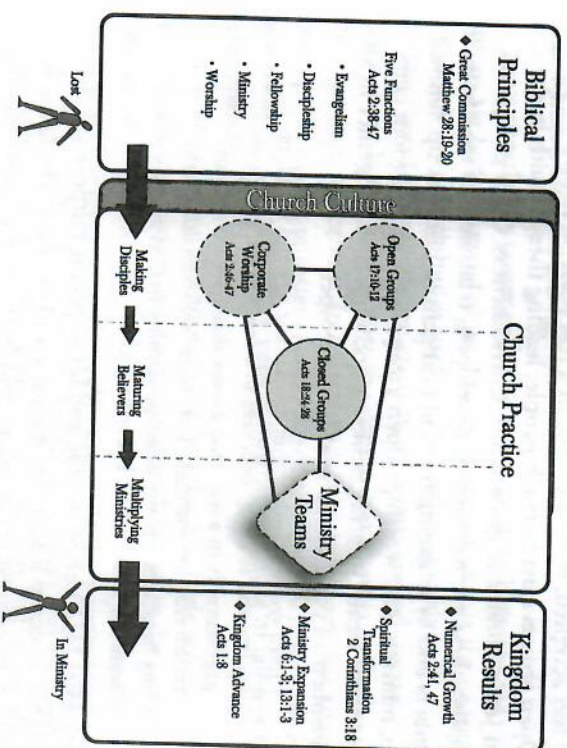
²⁹ Warren, 144.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

135

is anchored in the concept of relationships. The model is called the "1-5-4 Principle"³⁰ and has as its goal a return to the Great Commission. At the heart of this model lie several kinds of groups: open groups, closed groups, and ministry teams. It is to those groups within the body that we now turn our attention.

A Kingdom-Focused Church Model and Process



The Church as Small Groups

Jeffery Arnold defines a "small group" in this context as "an intentional gathering of three to 12 people who commit themselves to work together to become better disciples of Jesus Christ."³¹ The author continues, "People can only learn and grow in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. That atmosphere is Christian community. Community is not one aspect of group life, it is the very structure within which the group operates."³²

³⁰ Gene Mims, *The Kingdom Focused Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 150.

³¹ J. Arnold, *The Big Book on Small Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

Mims's model for maturing a believer in Christ is shown above. It expresses the implementation of the functions of the church through groups. He suggests that in most churches unsaved individuals come into the church either through the worship service or through the Bible study or Sunday school. In these arenas they encounter the Word of God and experience the warmth of Christian fellowship. Such *open groups* are effective in drawing in new members because they feel accepted, welcome, and, in a real sense, at home.

Open groups exist to reach people, leading them to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and growth into Christlikeness. Open groups accomplish these eternal ends by developing relationships among their members and by engaging them in evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and worship. Open groups are small kingdom communities designed to bring believers and unbelievers together in an atmosphere of compassion to share the gospel.³³

Closed groups, on the other hand, exist to build kingdom leaders and to equip believers to serve. Closed groups engage learners in a way that moves them toward spiritual transformation through short-term, self-contained training in an atmosphere of accountability to God and to one another.³⁴

They exist for a period of time and for a specific purpose and are designed to equip leaders for maturity and ministry. The focus is training, its context is discipling, and its intent is to move its members on to the next level of Christian experience and commitment.³⁵ The maturing process for the believer is focused in the closed groups through a sense of intimacy and accountability. Examples of these would be such studies as *Experiencing God*³⁶ or a grief support group. Through these small groups they are deployed in ministry and service to others. Equipping and training for service and ministry ought to be the natural outcome of the discipleship process.

The third small group is the *ministry team* that ministers to people in the church and out in the community.

³³ Mims, *The Kingdom Focused Church*, 130.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁶ H. Blackaby and C. V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: B&H, 1994).

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN TEACHING

137

Ministry teams exist to build up the body of Christ to accomplish the work of service within the church and advance the kingdom of God throughout the world. The work of kingdom advance is a work of beginning new kingdom communities with an urgency to reach those without Christ.³⁷

Ministry teams provide the tangible means for members to extend their reach and magnify their impact on the culture and the church.

The Church One Anothering

Jesus specifically commanded us to teach other believers the things He had commanded us. Teaching one another is the process by which the church builds itself up through its members.³⁸

The New Testament is replete with admonitions and instructions about how Christians are to relate to one another in the body. Relationships are central. In light of this, it is significant that among the top 10 reasons ministers leave churches today is a failure in relationships.³⁹ Counselors are kept in business because of failures in relationships.

Ian Jones calls our attention to the fact that the Bible stresses the importance of relationships in the church by using the phrase "one another" approximately 160 times, 125 of those in the New Testament. The term occurs over 80 percent of the time in the New Testament to reflect the meaning of positive support and affirmation. Christians have a responsibility to develop, support, and maintain *koinonia* relationships with one another.⁴⁰ One example will suffice from 1 Thess 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing."

The Church Reaches Out through Community: A Picture of the Family

You have all heard the old joke: "I love the church; it's the people I find difficult." But the picture Jesus left with His disciples was

³⁷ Mims, *Kingdom Focused Church*, 150.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁹ C. Turner, "Terminations," in *Facts and Trends*, LifeWay Church Resources, January/February 2007.

⁴⁰ I. Jones, *The Counsel of Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: B&H, 2006). Dr. Jones is professor of counseling and director of the counseling center at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, 210.

no mere sentiment. In his final prayer for the disciples, He prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by Your name that You have given Me, so that they may be one as We are one" (John 17:11b). Paul reinforced this writing: "Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom 12:10). A picture of the church would not be complete without reference to the family of God. The American emphasis on individualism, so prevalent today, cuts right across the church community culture of mutuality, relationships, and servanthood. More will be said about this in chapter 9, but allow me to offer just one positive illustration.

On a recent trip to Honolulu, I met Pua, a student in our childhood ministry program.⁴¹ She is a genuine Hawaiian from the forbidden island of Niihau where no visitors are allowed. She told us about growing up on the island and how her grandfather would gather the family at the end of the day for a time of Bible reading and prayer. She said no matter where she had been on the island, or how scattered the family was, devotions did not begin until she and the others were all there. After a time of singing, praying, and Bible reading, a time followed of confession and making things right with the others in the group. She told us her grandfather would seem to know when there had been harsh words or dissension among the smallest of them. He would give opportunities for family members to confess, and then he would wait. Only when every person was in right relationship with all the others would he close the prayer time, and they were allowed to go to bed.

What a wonderful heritage to grow up in a family where biblical principles were practiced in the family. This is the picture of the church as God's family. When Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one, just as He and the Father were one, that prayer was for the individual, the family, and the church. Mims says that when we receive Christ we become part of a living fellowship with others who, like us, have been called out. We are members of one another and part of a great family of believers across the world, across time, and for eternity. Believers share a bond in Christ that is unique and distinguishes our relationships from any other group in the world.⁴²

⁴¹ Anecdote is used with Pua's permission, January 8, 2007.
⁴² Mims, *Kingdom Principles*, 47.

Mims calls this "familyship." Fellowship in the Spirit allows us to be part of God's family. We all belong to one another and to the Father.⁴³ As the family reaches out to the extended family and to the worldwide family, it projects a microcosm of the church.

A Personal Reflection

When I think back about what I learned from my personal church experience, one thing stands out above the others. I am frequently reminded how much theology I learned from singing the great hymns of the faith. As a child, I probably did not understand the significance of all the words I sang, but later in life those words are still etched in my memory. Although I may not remember where I put my keys down, I have not forgotten some of the truths in this chapter that I heard and learned as a child. For instance, these words by Samuel Stone penned in 1886:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord
 She is his new creation, by water and the word.

From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride;

With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.⁴⁴

The Church is Christ's most precious possession, and He has entrusted us with its care. Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus, "Just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Eph 5:25b). Through our relationships with one another in the church, we teach, the means by which the world will come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. How does your church incorporate new members into the fellowship?
2. Discuss ways your church helps members grow into mature believers.
3. What church activities provide opportunities for making family memories?

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁴ The Gospel Music Archive, www.gospelmusic.org.uk/4-g/churches_one_foundation.htm, accessed September 14, 2007.

4. Create a model of your own to picture "relationships within the church."

Bibliography

- Arnold, Jeffery. *The Big Book on Small Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992.
- Bilezikian, Gilbert. *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997.
- Blackaby, Henry, and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville: B&H, 1994.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. New York: HarperCollins, 1954.
- Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1989.
- Jones, Ian F. *The Counsel of Heaven on Earth: Foundations for Biblical Christian Counseling*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H, 2006.
- Maynard, Morlee, comp. *We're Here for the Churches*. Nashville: LifeWay Christian Resources, 1999.
- Mims, Gene. *The Kingdom Focused Church*. Nashville: B&H, 2003.
- _____. *Kingdom Principles for Church Growth*. Nashville: LifeWay Church Resources, 1994.
- Turner, Chris. "Terminations." In *Facts and Trends*. LifeWay Church Resources, January/February 2007.
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

Chapter 9

THE FAMILY'S ROLE IN TEACHING

Scott Floyd

Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves,
so that you don't forget the things your eyes have seen
and so that they don't slip from your mind

as long as you live.

Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

(Deut 4:9)

I just wish my family had been more like the Huxtables," Dave said to me as we sat in the counseling room. I thought of how many times as a counselor I had heard similar phrases. Depending on the age of the client, it could just as well have been Ozzie and Harriet, the Cleavers, or the Bradies. Many clients express a desire for a family quite different from the one they had—supportive families who paid attention, communicated love and affection, and taught about God and His ways. Dave's family was like so many that clients have described to me—busy father and tired mother finally divorced, leaving Dave and his siblings to be shuffled between houses and stepfamilies. Now Dave, a father himself, struggled with hurt, anger, and sadness over the absence of a template of how to be a good parent to his own children. We spent the next several sessions talking about how a parent can help a family grow into one that honors God and reflects His love and care.

How can the church assist individuals like Dave to build strong families? How can churches equip and support parents to rear children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4)? What role does teaching play in families that are vital and resilient?

Perhaps the most appropriate starting point in discussing the family's role in teaching is defining *family* and considering it from a theological, scriptural perspective. Next we'll address how teaching should take place in families, and specifically, what is necessary for parents to transmit to children regarding matters of faith. Last, how can the church assist families in teaching their children the things of God?

Defining Family

A universally accepted definition of *family* remains elusive even among those who study family. Efforts to define family often produce disagreement based on the motivation of those attempting to create the definition and whether they are coming from a legal, sociological, political, or biblical perspective.

In his book *The Future of the American Family*, George Barna was one of the first to identify the difficulty in defining family. He noted that American society was moving in the direction of having two definitions of family—traditional and nouveau. Barna defined the term *traditional family* as people “related to each other by marriage, birth or adoption.” He also described what he called the *nouveau family*, or “two or more people who care about each other.”¹ Barna believed that society was increasingly shifting in the direction of adopting a nouveau definition of family. Garland observed that struggles to define family also include whether the definition identifies how a family “is” or how the family “ought to be.”²

Families: Ideal Versus Real

The biblical ideal is one man and one woman in a one-flesh, covenant relationship. As God allows, the couple bears children. The family relationship is to be marked by closeness, care, support, and commitment. Family is not an end in itself but a channel through which God works in the lives of those around the family.

Although the Bible presents an ideal for families, the Bible also portrays the reality of family life. Problems of family life as presented in Scripture include divorce, adultery, sibling rivalry, incest, single

parenthood, pregnancy outside of marriage, blended families, cohabitation, jealousy, deceit between members, and in-law conflict. Many biblical characters struggled with family problems, including Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Eli, Samuel, and David. While the Bible presents the ideal for family, it also notes the difficulties in achieving this level of functioning.

Similarly, family life in modern society is fraught with difficulties. While most adults marry, around one-third of all marriages end in divorce³ with around 1.2 million divorces occurring in the U.S. each year.⁴ Whitehead and Popenoe, experts in family-life trends, observe that a couple who marries now has a 40–50 percent lifetime probability of separation or divorce.⁵ Two-parent families, where parents are married to each other, are increasingly less common. According to the 2000 census, the number of single mothers increased from three million in 1970 to ten million in 2000, and two million fathers are single parents.⁶ Whitehead and Popenoe note that cohabitation is becoming progressively more common in American society: “Most people now live together before they marry for the first time. An even higher percentage of those divorced who subsequently remarry live together first. And a growing number of persons, both young and old, are living together with no plans for eventual marriage.”⁷ In 2003, one-third of all births and two-thirds of births of African-American children were out of wedlock.⁸ Clearly, in modern-day America, the family faces numerous challenges. This, however, should not stop individuals from striving for the ideal. T. B. Maston states:

³ Barna Update, “Born Again Christians Are as Likely to Divorce as Non-Christians” (Sept. 8, 2004), accessed 29 March 2007 at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170>.

⁴ Center for Disease Control, *National Vital Statistics Report—Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2005*, vol. 54 no. 20, accessed 29 March 2007 at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr54/nvsr54_20.pdf.

⁵ B. D. Whitehead and D. Popenoe, “The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America (2005),” <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/Print/PrimSOOU2005.htm> (accessed 7 February 2007), 18.

⁶ P. Fraenkel, “Contemporary Two-Parent Families: Navigating Work and Family Challenges,” *Normal Family Processes*, 3rd ed., ed. Froma Walsh (New York: Guilford, 2003), 64.

⁷ Whitehead and Popenoe, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹ G. Barna, *The Future of the American Family* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 26.

² D. Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1999), 22.

We need very much in the contemporary period to rediscover and take seriously the biblical ideal for the family and family relations: one man and one woman joined together as husband and wife for life, fulfilling the purposes of God for their home and sending out into the world individuals—husband, wife, and children—who will put first in their lives the kingdom or reign of God and who will be channels for God's love and compassion as he seeks to reach out to those in need.⁹

Such an ideal is not easy to obtain. A biblical understanding of family provides us with a clearer idea of family life and of God's design for families.

Theology of Family

An investigation into a scriptural/theological perspective of family pays rich dividends in our understanding of family. The Bible contains an extensive amount of information about family.

Family Created from the Beginning and Valued by God

We find family presented in the very first pages of Scripture. Genesis 2 provides a picture of the first couple. God created Adam, then fashioned Eve for him as a helper. Adam could hardly contain his excitement when he first saw Eve, saying, "This one, at last, is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). God instructed the couple to "be fruitful and multiply." From the beginning the Bible offers a picture of the first couple and the first family. Family was created before any other institution, including government, schools, social organizations, or even church.

Not only was family created from the beginning, but family is valued by God. Although Adam had the entire garden to himself, which included intimate fellowship with God, God observed, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Similarly, King Lemuel noted that a wife of noble character was "far more precious than jewels" (Prov 31:10). Psalm 127:3-5 says, "Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, children, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons born in one's youth. Happy is the man who has filled his

THE FAMILY'S ROLE IN TEACHING

quiver with them." Not only did God create family from the beginning, He places a great value on family.

God Came to Live with Us through Family

When God came to live among humankind, He chose to do so through a family. The family He chose was not wealthy, not especially educated, and lived in a town that was so small that it was the object of jokes. When God came to live with us in Christ, He entered the world as an infant and grew up experiencing all the things families go through. Jesus had siblings, surely had chores, and even once was left in the temple. Jesus, our great high priest, encountered things common to all families.

While Jesus experienced life as a part of a family, He also came to restore families. Malachi 4:6, the last verse in the Old Testament, speaks of the coming Messiah, stating, "And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers." Luke 1:17 also acknowledges this purpose of the coming Messiah: "to turn the hearts of fathers to their children." God came to live with humans through a family with a purpose of restoring relationships between family members that can become so fragmented by the pressures of life.

The Bible Teaches about Family

The Bible contains many passages that provide direct information about families. Ephesians 5-6 instruct husbands, wives, parents, and children how to behave in relationship to one another. The book of Proverbs includes numerous passages teaching family members how to have healthy, God-honoring relationships. Some of the key family-related issues in the book of Proverbs are marital faithfulness (5:15-23), the wife of noble character (31:10-31), the value of a good wife (12:4; 14:1; 18:22), nagging (21:9), adultery (6:24-35; 7:6-27), obeying parents (1:8-9; 23:22-25), learning from parents (4:1-9; 6:20-22), parental discipline (13:24; 23:13-14; 29:15,17), the shameful son (19:26), and the value of passing along one's inheritance (13:22).

In addition to passages that provide direct information about families, many other stories and Bible figures offer indirect information regarding family life. God's Word relates narratives about

⁹ T. B. Maston, *The Bible and Family Relations* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), 56.

marriages, childbirth, parenting, and sibling relationships. The Bible conveys both positive and negative pictures of family life in many of its stories. We can learn from both the good examples and from the problems faced by many family members presented in the pages of Scripture.

Indirect teachings in Scripture include God as Father, Jesus as the Son, fellow believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, and the collection of believers as the family of God. T. B. Maston states, "The importance of family is underscored by its symbolic or figurative use in the Scriptures. The family and family relations are frequently used to describe God's relation to his people and their relations to him."¹⁰ From both direct and indirect perspectives, the Bible is a treasure trove of information about family life.

Family as Transmitter of the Faith

In Scripture one indisputable task of families is to be transmitters of faith. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 conveys this idea in an unambiguous, forthright manner. Moses gave the children of Israel the commandments of God and told them to

"repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Christianson states, "Having understood these commandments in depth, they [parents] were to *teach them diligently to their children*. The commandments were to be the focus of constant discussion inside and outside the home. In short, they were to permeate every sphere of human life."¹¹ Knowledge of God and of His commands was to be so woven into the lives of the Israelites that they would naturally convey the stories of God to their children.

The psalmist Asaph also communicated a similar message in Psalm 78. He spoke of not only being aware of God's mighty deeds,

¹⁰ Maston, *Bible and Family Relations*, 53.

¹¹ D. Christianson, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Baker (Dallas: Word, 1991), 144 (italics his).

but making sure future generations knew of these as well. In verses 2b-7, he states:

I will speak mysteries from the past—
things we have heard and known
and that our fathers have passed down to us.
We must not hide them from their children,
but must tell a future generation the praises of the Lord,
His might, and the wonderful works He has performed.
He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in

Israel,
which He commanded our fathers to teach to their children
so that a future generation—
children yet to be born—might know.
They were to rise and tell their children
so that they might put their confidence in God
and not forget God's works, but keep His commands.

This passage imparts a method for transmission of the faith. Individuals are to notice and remember the things God does. They tell their children these things, communicating what God is like and what God has accomplished. In turn, these children grow up and tell the stories to their children, encouraging them to keep God's commands. In this manner faith is transmitted generation to generation.

Timothy's family provides a specific example of this generational transmission of faith. In the opening of his second letter to Timothy, Paul brings to mind Timothy's "sincere faith that first lived in your grandmother Lois, then in your mother Eunice, and that I am convinced is in you also" (2 Tim 1:5). Timothy, the preacher and evangelist so loved by Paul, was a recipient of this generational transmission of faith, passed along by his grandmother and mother.

Family in Perspective

Without question family is important. Designed by God, families are to provide a haven for members, offer support and encouragement, and help little ones grow up in a safe, protected environment. However, devotion to family must be kept in perspective. While family is important, one's ultimate loyalty must be to God.

Jesus clearly emphasized this principle on at least a couple of occasions. Early in His ministry Jesus was teaching, and a large crowd

gathered around Him, filling the house where He was speaking. His mother and brothers came to get Jesus, perhaps concerned that He was embarrassing the family or making a fool of Himself (Mark 3:20–21). When Jesus was alerted that His family had come to get Him, Mark 3:33–35 gives Jesus' response: "Who are My mother and My brothers? And looking about at those who were sitting in a circle around Him, He said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother.'"

On another occasion, as He conversed with His disciples, Jesus made a statement about family life that, on the surface, sounds harsh:

"For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. The person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me." (Matt 10:35–37)

Both of these passages seem to contradict the idea that family is important. However, Jesus was not saying that family is unimportant but rather that family must never become an idol, a place where one's affections are located instead of in God. Jesus was not saying that He desired to divide families but rather that when a person truly follows Him it might hinder or even damage family relationships, turning family members against the one who is attempting to follow God. While family is important, each individual's ultimate loyalty must be to God. Nothing, not even the closest of family relationships, should supplant God.

Teaching through Families

The Bible clearly instructs parents to teach children about God. Parents are responsible for passing along the things of God to the next generation. But this task, educating children about God, is not a simple one. Accomplishing this undertaking entails teaching as a priority in family life, an intentional approach to teaching, and requires a level of dedication and commitment to the task of teaching children.

Teaching Is a Priority, Not an Option

In Bible times, parents were the primary teachers of children, and this task was a priority of family life. We have already examined Moses commanding the Israelites to teach their children in Deuteronomy 6, but we find numerous other similar instructions as well (Deut 4:9–10; 11:18–19; 6:20–25; 32:46). Likewise, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorted fathers, "Don't stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). The parents' role in instructing children is crucial to overall family development. While others may have aided them, the bulk of the responsibility in Bible times fell to the parents for the training of the child. Synagogues were meant to supplement what was done in families, not replace the teaching role of parents.

Teaching should also be a priority in family life because parents are a child's most important and influential educators. Parents spend far more time around children in their most formative developmental years, more time than schoolteachers or teachers in religious settings such as Sunday school. Similarly, family life affords many teaching opportunities, and parents do not have to create simulated environments for many lessons they may want to teach children. Maston states:

Furthermore, parents can be opportunistic teachers, relating the teaching to immediate situations that arise in the daily life at home. Other teachers, school and particularly Sunday School teachers, have to imagine or erect more or less artificial situations. They can hope or trust that the child will succeed in carrying over into real life the truths they have sought to teach.¹²

Because parents exert such a strong and lasting influence, teaching must be a family priority.

Making Teaching Intentional

Effective parent-teachers are intentional about what they convey to children. Such parents make decisions about what they want to convey to children; then they work to do so. Often teaching takes place whether or not a parent intends to provide a child with

¹² Maston, *Bible and Family Relations*, 231–32.

information. Children often learn by observing parents and seeing how parents act in a variety of situations. Because children can learn in such a manner, parents have to be aware of what they are communicating and should be intentional about messages sent to children. On some occasions parents will say one thing and do another. Parents may say church is important but regularly sleep in when tired. In such circumstances the conflict between word and action confuses children who tend to imitate actions more than words.

Unfortunately, parents can teach both good and bad. One evening this past year, a local news station reported the story of a young teenager and her mother arrested for shoplifting. The mother had taught the child how to steal, and they were working together to take items from a store. Because children can learn bad as well as good, wrong as well as right, and immoral as well as moral, effective parent-teachers are intentionally positive in what they impart.

Teaching Involves Dedication and Commitment

Effective teaching in families requires dedication and commitment from parents, both to God and to the task of teaching. At the most basic level this means parents having a vital, growing relationship with Christ. Deuteronomy 6:4-9, discussed earlier, presupposes that a parent loves God with all his or her heart, soul, and strength. Slaughter notes that "if parents are to teach their children the truth about a relationship with God, they themselves must have hearts burning with passion for Him. They must love God with all their heart, soul, and strength; in other words, with every aspect of their being."¹³ If parents are not seeking personal spiritual growth, teaching children the things of God becomes a much more difficult proposition.

Dedication and commitment also involves parents working together to teach children. Individuals who study family dynamics have long recognized the value of spouses being unified in their parenting, seeking parental accord in every aspect of family life, including attempts to help children learn and grow. Effective parent-teachers communicate with each other, work through couple con-

¹³ J. Slaughter, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Family," in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Family Life Education*, ed. Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 26-27.

lict, and work toward agreement in how best to teach children. True parental unity requires a great deal of commitment.

Single parents often do not have the luxury of support from other individuals in parenting tasks. In such instances successful single parents are consistent in how they relate to their children, including when teaching children. Grandparents can also be an important part of the teaching process. Both Deut 4:9 and Exod 10:2 encourage teaching both sons and grandsons the things of God. Grandparents can serve an important role in supporting parents as they attempt to achieve unity in marital and parenting tasks.

Yet another element of parent dedication to the teaching task is knowing each child and fashioning the educational process in a manner that most effectively helps a child learn and grow. Proverbs 22:6 says, "I train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (NKJV). Not only are parents commanded to train or teach, but effective parent-teachers develop an understanding of how a child grows and learns. Regarding this passage, Keil and Delitzsch state, "The instruction of youth, the education of youth, ought to be conformed to the nature of youth; the matter of instruction, the manner of instruction ought to regulate itself according to the stage of life, and its peculiarities."¹⁴ Parents who have an understanding of a child's developmental level are more likely to be successful in the overall teaching process.

Effective parent-teachers not only have knowledge about stages of growth and development but understand each child's personality, temperament, and the unique manner in which the child tends to learn. Because children learn differently, parents need to know how best to convey information so a child can learn and grow. Several methods for accomplishing this task are identified later in this chapter.

Why Parents Don't Teach

If intentionally teaching children the things of God is such a vital part of a family's responsibility, why are so many parents reticent or

¹⁴ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, vol. 6 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. M. G. Easton (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1984), 86-87.

lax about doing so? Parents may have a variety of reasons for failing to teach children.

1. *I don't know how; I don't know enough.* Some parents fail to teach due to feeling inadequate to accomplish the task. Parents may be aware of personal shortcomings in knowledge of Scripture, or they may feel uncertain in making statements about God's nature and character. Other parents are unsure about how to pass along information about God. In some instances a parent may not have grown up in a Christian home or had parents that modeled how to convey the things of God. Like Dave in the story at the start of the chapter, many parents lack a template, model, or framework of how to teach children.

2. *I'm too tired or too busy.* Bysiness often contributes to parents' lack of a systematic attempt to teach children. In today's society, families often function at a frantic pace, investing time and energy not only in a wide array of kid-oriented activities but in transporting children from one activity to the next. Such a pace of life leaves both parents and children fatigued, even exhausted. When families operate in such a manner, teaching is often relegated to school systems, coaches, instrument teachers, and church personnel. Parents may have good intentions to teach their children, but these are often shortchanged by the frantic pace of life.

3. *My spouse will do it.* Some parents fail to teach children, believing or hoping that their spouse will do it. Fathers may be most prone to this excuse as mothers are often considered the main nurturers of children. The Bible makes clear the father's responsibility in numerous passages, including Eph 6:4; Pss 44:1; 78:3; 38:19; and Gen 18:19. As was mentioned earlier, it is ideal when parents work together and support each other in teaching children. Such teamwork produces an effect far greater than either parent alone can accomplish in carrying out this function of the family.

4. *My kids are too old; I missed my opportunity.* Parents may believe that they have missed their opportunity and that children are too old to be taught. While teaching older children, especially teenagers, is markedly different from teaching young children, it is never too late to pass along to children the things of God. If a parent has failed one way or another, it might be appropriate to apologize

sincerely to children, confessing not doing a better job at this important responsibility. Parents can then begin the teaching process again, even if children are older. If children are grown, parents may get another opportunity with grandchildren. Interestingly, the Bible never indicates an age at which parents are free to stop teaching. The generational transmission of faith appears to be a lifelong task.

5. *I'm trusting the church to do it*—This, unfortunately, is a common reason that many parents refrain from teaching children matters of faith. Because churches have resources and trained personnel, even committed Christian parents find themselves relying on the church to provide religious education to their children. At times the church may even cooperate in this matter, conveying to parents that “we,” not parents, can do a better job of teaching children. The outcome is that parents become passive bystanders, sending children to Sunday school, discipleship, mission programs, and a myriad of church-based activities, relying on the church to do the bulk of spiritual education and training. When churches fail to train and support parents in education tasks, the result is parent passivity, church over-responsibility, and a method of educating children that is divergent from the model provided in Scripture.

Ways Parents Can Teach Children

How, then, should parents teach children? Are there approaches that will help parents transmit faith to the next generation? Such teaching can be formal or informal, planned or spontaneous, and can be accomplished through a variety of channels.

Formal or Informal, Planned or Spontaneous

A parent has available a range of ways to teach children. Teaching may be formal, where parents intentionally structure what they convey. Parents may make use of literature or specific activities to help teach. Teaching can be informal, where, in a relaxed and casual atmosphere, parents talk about religious stories, themes, or concepts. Teaching may be planned, where parents are systematic and deliberate in what they try to accomplish, or teaching may be spontaneous, where parents use natural opportunities to communicate about God's world. Ideally, parents will be open to all these possibilities, having

an overall plan but being attentive to a variety of opportunities to teach children. Parents have different ways they may accomplish both formal and informal training. Here we focus on seven specific ways parents can teach their children: modeling, discipline, the natural world, stories, special occasions, worship, and the child's successes and failures.

Teaching through Modeling. Children learn vicariously, that is, by watching and observing behavior of others, especially parents. When a child sees a parent praying, attending church regularly, talking with others about his or her faith, ministering to those in need, and living a consistent, God-honoring life, the child is in a position to learn efficiently and effectively. Both Jesus and Paul understood this principle. Jesus gathered around Him 12 followers and allowed them to observe Him over His three years of ministry. Similarly, Paul told believers, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1 NIV). Paul lived his life openly before fellow believers and urged them to watch and emulate him. When a parent models an active, growing relationship with Christ, it communicates more than many Sunday school lessons.

Teaching through Discipline. Discipline is often equated with punishment, but it is much more than that. One meaning of discipline is "to learn," and it is the word from which we get our word *disciple*, or "one who learns." Slaughter notes that discipline is an essential parental duty: "The Proverbs frequently address the parental responsibility of discipline in the child training process."¹⁵ Proverbs, in fact, was written "for learning what wisdom and discipline are; for understanding insightful sayings; for receiving wise instruction in righteousness, justice, and integrity" (Prov 1:2-3).

When a parent wants a child to learn to brush his or her teeth, the parent must work with the child, over and over again, until dental hygiene is a part of the child's routine. In spiritual matters parents should assist children to develop habits of healthy spiritual functioning. This includes regular Scripture reading, prayer, worship attendance, tithing, and service to others.

Discipline requires parental consistency, persistence, and repetition. Parents labor with a child repeatedly in order for the child to

¹⁵ Slaughter, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Family," 27.

learn a new repertoire of behaviors such as brushing teeth, riding a bike, or cleaning a room. Proverbs 13:24 states, "The one who will not use the rod hates his son, but the one who loves him disciplines him diligently." That is, loving parents are diligent about training their children through discipline. Moreover, the most effective parents discipline themselves even as they discipline their children.

Teaching through the Natural World. Romans 1:20 says that one way we learn about God is from the world around us: "For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse." Similarly David says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of His hands. Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge" (Ps 19:1-2). Parents can teach children about God by pointing to God's creation and making children aware of the intricacy of God's handiwork.

Parents can easily link things seen in nature to God as Creator. Taking a child for a walk, a parent can draw the child's attention to the detail of a leaf, the pattern of clouds overhead, or the number of stars in the nighttime sky. Parents can connect things seen in nature to Scripture. When looking at the stars, for instance, a parent could tell the child about Ps 147:4: "He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them." Imagine knowing the names of all the stars! When viewing nature, parents have a wonderful opportunity of helping children express thanks to God for His creation. Children learn to be attentive to God's world and appreciative for it.

Teaching through Stories. One of the most effective methods of teaching children is through stories. Parents can both tell and read Bible stories to children, talking about what took place in these stories, about the characters and events presented. Parents can read to children from age-appropriate literature that teaches about God. Especially when they are young, story time is formative in children, establishing lifelong habits of loving to learn.

Stories may also involve parents telling children accounts of family history and events, of what life was like when parents were young, and of a child's own past. Parents can be intentional in communicating stories of how God has worked in their own lives and in

the lives of grandparents, as well as stories of how God has cared for and provided for the family.

The Old Testament especially emphasizes storytelling as a method of communicating about God. Deuteronomy 6:20–21 says, "When your son asks you in the future, 'What is the meaning of the decrees, statutes, and ordinances, which the Lord our God has commanded you?' tell him, 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand.'" When the child asked, the parent was to tell the story of the exodus from slavery.

Teaching through Special Occasions. Special occasions are wonderful opportunities for communicating messages about God, creation, and the need for thankfulness to God. Throughout the Old Testament, God established numerous feasts and festivals, memorials, and ways of remembering how God cared for His children. Special events and holidays are important in family and community life and serve as opportunities to help children learn traditions of a family or culture. In the book of Exodus, Moses instructed the Israelites in how to celebrate the Passover both initially and in the years to come. In Exod 12:26, Moses established a teaching ritual regarding the Passover observance: "When your children ask you, 'What does this ritual mean to you?' the parents are to tell the children of God's deliverance.

Parents have the opportunity to shape holidays and special occasions to convey specific messages to children. Parents can talk about God, God's work, and God's care, as well as about how God wants people to celebrate and remember Him. Shaping holidays around God and His Word counteracts the damaging effects of commercialism that have become so commonplace in most holiday seasons.

Teaching through Worship. Children learn about God through worship, whether at church or in a family setting. In corporate worship children participate with the family of God as they express gratitude to God. In recent times many churches have opted to separate small children from worship, leaving them in nurseries. Other churches have children's church or even services for teens. While these may be attempts to help children and teens learn at age-appropriate levels, there is much for children to absorb in adult worship services. Parents still bear the responsibility for helping

children know how to participate in worship in a corporate setting. Even when children are small, parents can help them with words to songs and looking up Scripture passages in the Bible. Following services, parents can dialogue with older children and teens about messages conveyed in the sermon. Simply watching parents and other respected adults sing, pray, and listen attentively prepares them to worship as well.

At home families can develop simple worship times for children. This may include singing, Bible verses, or family members identifying things for which they are grateful. Worship time may be structured around special occasions (Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, for instance) or may be a regular occurrence throughout the year. Parents should help children know how to worship and can assist children in making this a regular part of life.

Teaching through a Child's Successes and Failures. Yet another avenue of teaching a child is through the child's own accomplishments and disappointments. When a child achieves success in some task, parents can encourage the child to express gratitude to God for His guidance, His help, and the abilities and talents given a child. Similarly, however, when a child undergoes disappointments, parents have wonderful opportunities to provide comfort and support, and to help the child face and cope with disappointment. In Rom 5:3–5, Paul says,

And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Struggles in life also provide a chance for children to learn that contentment is not based on outward circumstances or events. In Philippians, writing while imprisoned, Paul states, "I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well-fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need" (4:12). Paul recognized that happiness is not based on circumstances and that contentment is

a choice. Similarly, children can learn through difficult times as well as when things go well.

Thus, parents have numerous means available for teaching children about God. While the list above is certainly not exhaustive, it represents a wide range of ways—formal and informal, planned and spontaneous—whereby parents are able to help children learn.

How Can the Church Assist Families in Teaching Children?

Dr. Lawson's chapter on "The Role of the Church in Teaching" describes ways a community of believers fulfills a teaching function. But here we focus on the church's role and responsibility in helping families teach children. How can the church best assist families? There are a number of things churches can do to help equip parents as teachers of their own children.

Church leaders can understand and then foster the idea that they are collaborators with parents in the task of teaching children. Providing families with support, encouragement, and guidance in the teaching process increases the likelihood that parents can be effective in teaching children. Church leaders can point out theologically sound, developmentally appropriate curriculum or materials that parents may find beneficial. Leaders can provide parents information about stages of growth and development, including information about how children learn at each stage of development.

Leaders can train parents in actual methods and skills for teaching children, demonstrating how parents can accomplish the tasks described above. Churches can allow parents time to teach children. Many churches create and demand so much member busyness that parents are left little time for family activities. In order to avoid a church driven by programming and tradition, perhaps a critical beginning point for church leaders is to examine programming to see if the church is contributing unnecessarily to family stress and exhaustion. Perhaps leaders need to help some members learn how to say no to excessive church involvement since it is possible for members to become compulsive about religious busyness.

Last, churches may offer some form of parent support group where parents can exchange ideas about teaching and encourage

other parents in their teaching endeavors. Support and encouragement are vital to success, and the knowledge that other parents share similar challenges and victories can hearten parent-teachers. The partnership between parents and churches is vital to successful generational transmission of the knowledge of God.

Dave Revisited

Though Dave lamented not having a relationship with his parents in which he received a model of how to relate in a healthy manner, he decided to become active in teaching his children the things of God. He committed to take seriously his own spiritual growth, including focused Bible study and daily prayer. Dave and his wife began reading Bible stories to their six- and four-year-old daughters and became more intentional in pointing out God's handiwork in the world around them. The couple decided to take both their children to Sunday worship services, even though the younger daughter was eligible to remain in child care during these services. Dave and his wife wanted to be more active in helping the daughters understand and participate in worship. The couple asked three other families to meet one Friday each month to fellowship, to share ideas for teaching children, and to pray for one another's families. In our final counseling session, Dave told me that he and his wife would regularly evaluate how they were doing as parent-teachers and would be open to making adjustments as necessary. Dave was not only enthusiastic about his plans, but he seemed to have a sense of purpose accompanied by a type of peace produced by his ability to provide his daughters some of those vital elements he had not received in his childhood years.

Conclusion

Family is important to God. God values family and family life. Family is the most natural and potentially most effective means of teaching young ones about God. His creation, and His plan for humankind. Churches and ministry individuals have the critical task of assisting and supporting families as they teach children about God. Churches and families who work together in providing for the needs

of children in this manner become a powerful force in promoting, and ultimately proclaiming, the kingdom of God.

Bibliography

- Barna, George. *Barna Update*, "Born Again Christians Are as Likely to Divorce as Non-Christians (Sept. 8, 2004)," accessed 29 March 2007 at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170>.
- _____. *The Future of the American Family*. Chicago: Moody. Center for Disease Control. *National Vital Statistics Report—Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2005*, vol. 54 no. 20. Accessed 29 March 2007 at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr54/nvsr54_20.pdf.
- Christianson, Duane. *Deuteronomy 1–11*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A. Ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Baker. Dallas: Word, 1991.
- Fraenkel, Peter. "Contemporary Two-Parent Families: Navigating Work and Family Challenges." *Normal Family Processes*. 3rd ed. Ed. Froma Walsh. New York: Guilford, 2003.
- Garland, Diana. *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999.
- Kell, C. F., and F. Delitzsch. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*. Commentary on the Old Testament. Trans. M. G. Easton. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984.
- Maston, T. B. *The Bible and Family Relations*. Nashville: Broadman, 1983.
- Slaughter, James. "Toward a Biblical Theology of Family." In *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Family Life Education*. Ed. Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.
- Whitehead, Barbara, and David Popenoe. "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America (2005)." <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/PrintSOOU2005.htm> (accessed 7 February 2007), 18.