



The Vineyard of the Lord

The Condition of the Church
&
The Commission of the Church

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"Explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."

1 Corinthians 2:13

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W.D. Furioso, Writer ~ Frances Furioso, Editor

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Preface

One morning, I awoke reminiscing about a trip my wife and I had taken to South Africa with a young couple in June & July of 2015, wherein we were blessed with the opportunity to revisit many of the people we had befriended during the 13 years we lived and ministered in South Africa. It was a precious gift not always afforded to those who serve the Lord – namely, to be able to see some of the fruit of your labor.

This particular morning the Holy Spirit impressed upon me that type of ministry was finished for me – specifically, the traveling ministry, watering conventional churches, attending and ministering at “worship” services were, at least for us, a thing of the past.¹

I then thought about my present ministry of writing and correspondence as replacing that traveling ministry. As I did, the following scriptures and comments came to mind:

¹ I believe that God does work within the conventional churches and, to some measure, is able to bless His children in those contexts. I am not overtly against all conventional approaches to church ministry. It is rather that I don’t have faith in these conventional activities. When I look at the scriptures, and I look back at my experience, they seem foolish.

“...the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the Chief Cornerstone.”²

It is the ministry of apostles and prophets to lay Christ Jesus Himself as the Chief Cornerstone in the lives of individuals and churches. Often, in order to lay that foundation, false or faulty foundations need to be firstly uprooted or torn down, before laying and building upon the foundation of Christ.

“I have put my words in your mouth...to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”³

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: ... a time to plant and a time to uproot ... a time to tear down and a time to build....”⁴

So, there is a time and a place for uprooting and tearing down type messages to serve the purpose of “preparing the way of the Lord”. Forerunners like John the Baptist used words like, **“Even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees.”⁵** I’ve often said, I don’t think the prophets would have won many popularity

² Ephesians 2:20 NIV

³ Jeremiah 1:9b & 10b NIV

⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2b & 3b NIV

⁵ Luke 3:9 *ESV*

contests. In my own personal ministry, it seems the Lord has wanted to use me for both of these activities - both uprooting and tearing down, as well as planting and building. The uprooting and tearing down type messages are naturally unpleasant for any minister.

It seems that different ministers have different temperaments, as well as different callings, and therefore, have different perspectives, positive and negative, on the state of the Church. This is to say that some ministers are more like John the Baptist, “a voice in the wilderness” crying repentance; and others are more like Barnabus, the “son of encouragement”.⁶

“I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.”⁷

While I know that both activities are necessary, I would rather be investing my time and energy in a positive way, planting and building on the foundation of Christ rather than being occupied

⁶ While I accept as biblical a ministry calling to be a “watchman on the wall” discerning and alerting us regarding the movements of the Adversary; I am hard-pressed to find a scriptural example of a ministry calling to be a “watchdog” which is absolutely silent unless it is “biting and devouring” other ministries.

⁷ Revelation 10:10

with the business of uprooting and tearing down false and faulty foundations. It seems to me the apostle Paul felt the same way judging from something he wrote to the Corinthians referring to his ministry to them: **“... the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down.”**⁸

I have said all that to say this: In *The Condition of the Church*, I will be addressing the pervasive perspective and practice of ministry in the contemporary Western Church, which I understand to be a hindrance, or at least falling short of, the Great Commission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and co-labor with Him as He builds His Church. I don't take pleasure in being critical, in fact, I find it an unpleasant task; and I am certain that the reader will also find it unpleasant. Never-the-less, I hold the firm conviction that the conventional approaches to church ministry practiced in popular Christianity will not produce fruit that will remain and glorify His name.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 10:8 NIV



PART 1

The Condition of the Church

Introduction

My wife and I lived and ministered in South Africa from 1984 to 1997. In 1990, a pastor friend who decided to leave the work of ministry asked us if we would consider “adopting” his little flock. We had been invited to minister to this church every time we were ministering in their region. We prayed about the pastor’s proposal and agreed that it seemed to be the Lord’s will; so, we relocated from the Transvaal to the Western Cape province. After an initial season of communicating to them our perspective on “doing church”, it seemed that the next season should be to let everyone decide as to whether they wanted to then pursue what had been communicated or look for another church home. To facilitate this, I thought it might be a good idea to have this small group visit a broad spectrum of the churches in the locality each Sunday for a season – one in the morning and another in the evening. To be honest, I was hoping that maybe certain individuals might find a church they liked and decide to leave our group. Well, no one decided to leave our group – at least not at that time because of being exposed to another church they thought they would like. But the experiment did prove to be interesting. After visiting each church, we would discuss our impressions. Much to my surprise,

most of the impressions were positive. I think I was most surprised by my own perceptions: I felt that at every single church, with the exception of one, we had heard very good messages – scripturally sound and beneficial for living the Christian life. As a mere visitor, I could not comment on the quality of their community life; but regarding the whole of the worship services, while the variety of the different worship services was interesting and somewhat instructive, the overall spiritual quality of the worship and prayer of the churches seemed lackluster. Comparing that with the fairly high quality of the content and delivery of the messages, I could not help but wonder, “Why is this church not more spiritual, or more holy, or more consecrated, or more passionate, than it seems to be?” My conclusion at the time was this: There is teaching; and there is making disciples which involves “teaching them to observe”⁹, that is, not just saying, “Lord, Lord”, but actually “doing the will of My Father who is in heaven”.¹⁰ That requires additional ministry after the preaching and teaching. That’s what was missing – true **discipleship**. That was decades ago. I still hold to my conclusion. But I think I have also come to see more and more of the

⁹ Matthew 28:19-20

¹⁰ Matthew 7:21

implications of the lack of true discipleship in the Church. This story is one way of introducing what this article is about.

Much more recently (six years ago), I watched a number of preachers and teachers on a Christian television network. Occasionally, I find it interesting to watch religious charlatans and try to analyze their “pitch” and the reasons for their appeal and popularity. But this day, I was watching some teachers and preachers for whom I hold some regard. Again, I was impressed by the messages – the quality of the content and the expertise in delivery. I was also “impressed” by the success of their ministries. By that I mean their ability to reach *their goals* of attracting people, communicating effectively to them, and having their ministries growing from strength to strength. I am impressed with that in the same way I would be impressed with any enterprise having a good product, a good business plan, a good marketing strategy, and the resulting success in sales, market share and overall productivity and growth.

But, as I watched and listened, and as the camera periodically scanned the large audiences who had come to watch and listen, I questioned: “WHAT IS BEING PRODUCED and WHAT IS BEING

BUILT by these ministries?” The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart and mind using the two analogies of PRODUCING GOOD FRUIT and BUILDING A SPIRITUAL HOUSE. In this article, I’ll use both of these analogies to point to and assess the end result of ministry – that is, WHAT IS BEING PRODUCED and WHAT IS BEING BUILT?

In *The Condition of the Church*, we will take a look at a parable in the Old Testament – something Isaiah prophesied - known as “**The Vineyard of the Lord**”; and then consider what Jesus had to say about these things. I see this article as a more parabolic¹¹ and prophetic¹² way of emphasizing what was taught in more detail in my eBooks entitled, [Christ Is Prerequisite for Church](#) and [Christ-centered Discipleship & Equipping Ministries](#).

¹¹ By “parabolic” I mean instruction by the comparison of one thing with another. Cf. *Webster’s Dictionary* (1828). Cf. Psalm 78:1-2

¹² By “prophetic” I mean a speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God on a particular matter. Cf. Greek: *prophetikos* (Strong’s # 4397), *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*.

The Vineyard of the Lord

In Isaiah 5:1-6, we find what is called “The Parable of the Vineyard”, which is probably the “source material” of Jesus’ parables about vineyards:¹³

“Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so, He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes. ³ “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?”

So, here the Lord asks, “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?” We should ask ourselves: “What more could we do in His Vineyard that we have not done in it?” The Lord has given His all – Christ’s death, burial and

¹³ The Parable of the Worker in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-6); The Parable of the Two Sons in the Vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32); The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:33-41; The parable of the Fig Tree in the Vineyard (Luke 13:6-9).

resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures – we are complete in Christ.¹⁴ He has also given what is called the “Great Commission”; and by His Spirit, He has enabled us to co-labor with Him as He builds His Church. The answers to these questions are: The Lord could have done no more. The lack is obviously with us. We are not fulfilling **the commission to make disciples of Christ**. And we are “not in sync” with the Spirit of Christ as He builds His Church. Consequently, the Church is sorely failing with regards to moving in God’s calling for the Church.

I do not want to be misunderstood: In no way do I think that “extra effort” is going to result in accomplishing God’s will. Both the Christian life, and Church life are absolutely impossible without the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit gives the life of Christ which builds the Church. But my understanding is that the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is available to fulfill those Scriptures. The Spirit of Christ is available to build His Church. **“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts.”**¹⁵ Co-laboring with Him is not a matter of “extra effort” – it is a matter of surrendering our wills and our ways to His and

¹⁴ Colossians 2:10

¹⁵ Zechariah 4:6

getting “in sync” with Him. If we will surrender to His lordship and His headship in the Church, we will “Shout grace” – the Spirit of Grace - to “this mountain” of failure “and bring forth the Head Stone” along with the foundation Stone of the Lord’s dwelling place.¹⁶

In the section entitled The Condition of the Church, I will discuss our condition. The section, The Commission of the Church, is what I have to offer in response.

The Holy Spirit had the Lord’s prophets speak of God’s people through comparisons with a vineyard, which were followed by Jesus’ parables about vineyards¹⁷. One example, found in Jeremiah 12:10, paints a peculiar Old Testament picture of how New Testament ministers can be “out of sync” with the Spirit of Christ as He builds His Church: **“Many shepherds have ruined My vineyard; they have trampled down My field; they have made My pleasant field a desolate wilderness.”** This pictures

¹⁶ Zechariah 4:7 Both the Foundation Stone and the Head Stone represent Christ as the Foundation and Head of the Church. The book of Zechariah, written during the time of the restoration of the temple after the Babylonian Captivity, has many wonderful types and lessons regarding the building of the Church!

¹⁷ The Parable of the Worker in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-6); The parable of the Two Sons in the Vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32); The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:33-41); The parable of the Fig Tree in the Vineyard (Luke 13:6-9).

shepherds herding in a vineyard – herding sheep in a vineyard instead of cultivating the vines. Why would anyone herd sheep in a vineyard? This is an example of ministers “doing their own thing”, and not co-laboring with Jesus as He builds His Church. The consequence, in spite of a plethora of good ministries of the word, is still clearly a spiritual desolation.

Popular

"What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." Luke 16:15b

Now, let's look at a passage in Matthew's gospel – the end of the Lord's "Sermon on the Mount". As I said, the intention of this article is to be more prophetic than expository, so, while being careful to consider the context of this passage, my aim is not to cover every detail, but to focus on that which emphasizes God's heart and mind on the matter.

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Matthew 7:13-14

Whether in secular society or the Church, what is popular in no way indicates quality in truth and life. As Jesus is indicating here, albeit harsh, the reality is quite the opposite. In our contemporary Western culture popularity and success go together. You may be thinking that this is so obvious it hardly needed to be stated. But this wasn't necessarily the case in other periods in our history.

And even today in other cultures, popularity and success don't necessarily go together. A biblical example is Luke's record of the Sermon on the Mount which has Jesus saying: **"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way."**¹⁸ In one sense it is uncanny how that which is false is so popular and successful. In another sense, it should not be so strange to us because the Scripture says that the unconverted are **"darkened in their understanding ... because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart"**.¹⁹ In fact, even people who come to Christ *have been conformed* to this world, and need to *stop being conformed* to this world, and have their minds renewed.²⁰

The most popular and successful ministers, ministries and churches today have very definite goals and are impressively achieving their goals. I would summarize their goals and successes as being **people-centered rather than God-centered**. As is obviously the case with Jesus and His apostles, being God-centered ultimately leads to rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom. Whereas being people-centered is a sure road to

¹⁸ Luke 6:26

¹⁹ Ephesians 4:18. Also Romans 1:21

²⁰ Romans 12:1-2 "Conformed" is in the Present passive imperative tense, meaning stop being conformed". (*Robertson's Word Pictures*)

popularity and success.

In his classic, “How to Win Friends and Influence People”, two of the techniques offered by Dale Carnegie to make people like you are: 1) Make the people feel important and 2) talk in terms of their interests.²¹ People are important; but **God is more important.**

People are naturally interested in “self”; **the Church needs to be interested in God.** Today’s popular and successful ministries often have logos unabashedly communicating that meeting people’s needs is their desired goal. I believe that fulfilling God’s desires goes far beyond meeting the needs of humanity.

Therefore, it seems to me, as “successful” as these ministries are, they are not producing good fruit, that is, they are not making true disciples of Jesus; and they are not co-laboring with Christ as He builds His Church. They are merely succeeding at making “successful” ministries. The assumption held by both the ministers and the public is that, if the ministries are increasing in productivity, they must be approved of God and fulfilling God’s purposes. But it is recorded that Jesus will say to many who **“prophecy in His name, and in His name cast out demons, and in His name perform many miracles, ‘I never knew you’”**.²²

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Win_Friends_and_Influence_People

²² Matthew 7:21-23

False

15 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits. 21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Matthew 7:15-23

Matthew 7:15 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” Here, Jesus is addressing false prophecy – referring to ministers who speak or operate falsely. While prophecy is ultimately intended to edify, exhort, and console the people of God,²³ the purpose of

²³ 1 Corinthians 14:3

prophecy is in no way limited to encouraging human beings. The purpose of true prophecy is to testify of Jesus²⁴, Who “declares” the Father,²⁵ **“the One with Whom we have to do”**.²⁶ It is that declaration, even if it is a “hard saying”, which should actually encourage the true people of God.

Just an observation about the biblical concepts of “true” and “false” as it relates to ministers: Along with false Christs, the Scripture also speaks of false brethren, false witnesses, false apostles, and false prophets. When we read these terms, we most likely make an almost unconscious assumption that these “false” people are all condemned. That may be the case. But it is also just as possible for these people to repent of that which is false and embrace that which is true. In one sense, before conversion, everyone is “false”.

But in a more accurate sense, “false” means hypocritical – pretending to be sent by God, when in reality, God hasn’t sent you; pretending to speak for God, when in reality, God has not

²⁴ Revelation 19:10

²⁵ John 1:18 (NKJV), Greek: *exegeomai* (Strong’s # 1834), to declare, explain, make known, *Vines Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*.

²⁶ Hebrews 4:13

given you anything to speak; pretending to be converted, when in reality, you are still self-centered. **That** is the meaning of “false”. I would like to discuss that further:

“False” means not operating in truth. I believe it is entirely possible for one who is a true brother in the Lord to operate as a false apostle or false prophet – both knowingly and unknowingly. Now, we must always pursue sound doctrine and judge false doctrine, for there can be no true unity of the Spirit outside of the Spirit of Truth. But I think there would be more “loving your neighbor as yourself” and less “biting and devouring one another”,²⁷ if we could look at falsity and hypocrisy in the Church in this way: “This particular minister may be a true brother who, at this time, is mistaken and *operating* falsely. I am going to distinguish between what is true and what is false in his ministry and pray that he will come to discern the Spirit of Truth in all things.”

A false prophet may knowingly or unknowingly speak that which is not true.²⁸ But I would like to suggest also that one can speak

²⁷ Galatians 5:14-15

²⁸ In the case of Matthew 7, I think we could conclude these false prophets whom Jesus referred to as “ravenous wolves” were knowingly speaking falsely for their own gain.

truth, yet still *operate* falsely. The falseness, has to do with wrong motivation: There is a **“proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition rather from pure motives”**.²⁹ And, **“where selfish ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil thing”**.³⁰ The falseness can also have to do with WHAT IS BEING PRODUCED or WHAT IS BEING BUILT: Much too often truth may be ministered, but the result is building a large following of people rather than **producing disciples of Jesus** – building an enterprise rather than **co-laboring with Christ as He builds His Church**. I am very aware that this can happen both knowingly and unknowingly on the part of the minister. I also know that, while I go to great lengths in striving to minister truth, I also have to constantly examine what it is that I am PRODUCING or BUILDING. Jesus purchased people with His blood, I didn’t. Therefore, people belong to Jesus, not me. He is their Lord, not me. People are to serve Him and His kingdom, not me and my ministry. I am aware that suggesting the idea that a true brother in the Lord can be ministering falsely sounds indefensible. But that is exactly what the apostle Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 3:10b **“But each man must be careful how he builds on it (the foundation of Christ). 11 For no man can lay a foundation other**

²⁹ Philippians 1:17

³⁰ James 3:16

than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."³¹

So, Paul says the minister will be saved, but what he PRODUCED and BUILT falsely – specifically, what is not produced by the Spirit of Christ, and that which is not built on the foundation of Christ – will be judged as worthless and burned.

³¹ Similar statements are made in other scriptures: Luke 6:46-49 & Hebrew 12:26-27.

“You will know them by their fruits.”

Matthew 7:16-20 “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

“You will know them by their fruits” – not by their gifts, but by their fruits. We cannot discern a ministry by the gifts of the minister. We cannot discern a ministry solely by what is being communicated in words. Jesus said good trees PRODUCE GOOD FRUIT, and bad trees PRODUCE BAD FRUIT. What is Jesus alluding to with His reference to “trees”? And what is it that makes a tree “bad”?

When I was a boy, across the street from our house was an apple orchard. This orchard was on a plot of land that bordered the railroad tracks and was owned by the county. This land was not well tended to; and, while it was a wonderful place for us to play, the apple trees were wild apple trees, and produced apples which

neither looked good, nor tasted good. There was nothing wrong with the original seeds which started that orchard. What caused the bad fruit was the fact that the trees were not tended. Later in life, I worked briefly in a commercial orchard. To produce good fruit, the trees were cultivated – the roots were aerated, the ground was weeded, the trees were watered, and protected from disease. It was my particular job to cut off the “suckers” – the unproductive branches. My point is this: It takes more than speaking truth to produce disciples of Christ – GOOD FRUIT REQUIRES CULTIVATION. And it takes more than speaking truth to co-labor with Christ as He builds His Church. When ministries produce poor fruit in the Church it is not necessarily because the ministry of the word is “bad”. “The seed is the word” - there is nothing necessarily wrong with the seed. It’s a bad tree. The tree represents the minister and the way he *operates* his ministry. Ministers and ministries that are not in sync with Jesus as He builds His Church, are building something else – a large following of people and an enterprise. They are extending their influence and building their ministries; but they are not necessarily producing disciples of Jesus or co-laboring with Christ as He builds His Church.

This lack of “pure and single devotion to Christ”³² is unfortunately not a description of the modern church only. It started in the first century; and has been with us throughout church history. It was probably about 62 A.D., while imprisoned in Rome, that the apostle Paul wrote these sad words to the Philippians: **“I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.”**³³

For ministries to be in sync with Jesus as He builds His Church, the ministers must operate like the apostle Paul: Being **“wise master builders, laying the foundation of Christ and building upon that foundation with gold, silver and precious stones”**³⁴ – **“so that everyone can be presented complete in Christ”**.³⁵ The desired fruit – the goal – is not meeting people’s needs. It is to **“present every disciple complete in Christ” – “the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”**³⁶ **“In everything He must be pre-eminent”**³⁷ – it is the revelation of Christ,

³² 2 Corinthians 11:3

³³ Philippians 2:20-21

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:10-12; Matthew 7:24-25

³⁵ Colossians 1:28

³⁶ Ephesians 4:13

³⁷ Colossians 1:18 *English Standard Version*

relationship with Christ and reflection of Christ that is the desired fruit.

Even the idea of producing “devoted disciples” can be man-centered. The desired fruit is God-centeredness, not man-centeredness, and certainly not a self-centeredness which is the insidious result of the “meeting people’s needs” approach to ministry. Certainly, God loves people and wants to meet their needs; and certainly, it is part of God’s purpose to “grow” and “build” people spiritually, for the Vineyard of the Lord – The Household of God – is made of people.

But Scripture says:

- **“For FROM HIM and THROUGH HIM and TO HIM are all things.”³⁸**
- **“For BY HIM all things were created...all things were created THROUGH HIM and FOR HIM.”³⁹**
- **“...HIM, FOR WHOM are all things and BY WHOM are all things.”⁴⁰**
- **“...FROM WHOM are all things, and we exist THROUGH HIM.”⁴¹**

³⁸ Romans 11:36

³⁹ Colossians 1:16

⁴⁰ Hebrews 2:10

⁴¹ I Corinthians 8:6

Scripture says God is to be all in all,⁴² so that, at the end, Christ hands over the kingdom to the God and Father.⁴³ We must ask ourselves: What is the nature of that kingdom and the Church that represents the kingdom? Does the kingdom exist primarily to serve Humanity or God? Underlying all the messages, behind all the ministries of the Church, which is the object of worship - the Creator or the creature?⁴⁴ The way we answer these questions will determine what is ultimately PRODUCED in people, or better, what kind of people are being PRODUCED. It is not the message (the seed) or the ministry (the tree), it is the FRUIT that ultimately reveals HOW people are being built, and what kind of people are being built – worshippers of God or lovers of self. “You will know them by their fruits.” Not by their gifts, but by their “fruits” – that is to say, “You will know them by what they are PRODUCING or BUILDING”.

21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many

⁴² 1 Corinthians 15:28

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 15:24

⁴⁴ For a more detailed discussion of God-Centeredness, see my article [The God-centered Life](https://www.AtChristsTable.org).

miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall." Matthew 7:21-27

Certainly, we can see in this passage the difference between a false disciple and a true disciple of Christ. A true disciple of Christ is one who knows the Lord and is known by God. A true disciple of Christ is one who has been "taught to observe all that Jesus commanded".⁴⁵ To "observe"⁴⁶ all that Jesus commanded" is to "hear His words" and "act on them", thus founding and building one's spiritual house on the Rock.

⁴⁵ Matthew 28:20 "observe":

⁴⁶ Greek: *tereo*, Strong's # 5083.



PART 2

The Commission of the Church

Introduction

The point I endeavored to make in *The Condition of the Church* is this: **Many ministries, while ministering good messages (seed), are not operating in sync with Jesus as He builds His Church and are therefore “bad trees” in the sense that the fruit of these ministries is not producing disciples of Christ, nor co-laboring in building the Church that Jesus is building.**

So then, it is in order to ask: What is a “good tree”? What is “good fruit”? What is it to “operate in sync with Jesus as He builds His Church”? What is needed to actually fulfill the apostolic commission to disciple all peoples to Christ? What is needed to be **“wise master builders, laying the foundation of Christ and building upon that foundation with gold, silver and precious stones”⁴⁷ – “so that everyone can be presented complete in Christ”⁴⁸ – “to the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”⁴⁹?**

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:10-12; Matthew 7:24-25

⁴⁸ Colossians 1:28

⁴⁹ Ephesians 4:13

After 50 years of being involved in the ministry of discipling, I have found it an absolute prerequisite to look at discipling (as well as, any other biblical subject matter) in light of the New Covenant. Accordingly, I would summarize my answer to the above questions with the term – **“New Covenant Apostolic Discipleship”**. This will be the subject matter of this section of the article – *The Commission of the Church* - but its essence can be stated as the **CULTIVATION OF CHRIST in others**.⁵⁰

My response to *The Condition of the Church* is a re-investigation and re-statement of Jesus’ commission to His disciples and apostles - specifically, to disciple all peoples⁵¹. We’ll begin with *Another look at the Great Commission* (In light of the

⁵⁰ “New Covenant Apostolic Discipleship” has to do with a *ministry relationship* between a disciple and an elder who is equipping minister - an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher - whom the ascended Christ has given to the Church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, to the building up of the body of Christ ... to the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”. Ephesians 4:11-13.

⁵¹ The Apostolic Bible Polyglot translation (a Greek-English Interlinear of the Greek Septuagint and New Testament coded to Strong's numbers) translates Matthew 24:14 like this: “to all [G3956](#) the ones [G3588](#) among the nations; [G1484](#)”. But in Matthew 28:19 it translates: “disciple [G3100](#) all [G3956](#) the [G3588](#) nations! [G1484](#)”. However, the Greek word which has been translated as “nations” is *ethnos*, which simply means **people groups**. Therefore, throughout this article, I will use the phrase **“disciple all peoples”** instead of “disciple all nations”. I don’t believe attempting to disciple a whole nation is a New Covenant ministry or mission. We are to disciple people (who so ever will) IN all nations.

New Covenant) – the WHAT, HOW, WHO and FRUIT of Discipleship. And we'll conclude with “Apostolic Discipleship”.

Another Look at the Great Commission

(In Light of the New Covenant)

Discipling

Discipling people - not planting churches – was the Lord's commission to His apostles. This is the strategy the Lord stated for His kingdom: We disciple people, and He builds His Church. But, generally speaking, instead of discipling people, we have built “churches”. The “churches” we have built are essentially Christian “clubs”.⁵² We have “club members” but very few disciples of Christ. What is a disciple of Christ? What is the essence of discipleship? How are disciples of Christ “made”? Who should we disciple? What is the fruit of faithfully fulfilling the Great Commission?

⁵² I say this with all sincerity: I can appreciate that many Christians enjoy having a Christian social network – particularly for their children. And I can also appreciate that there are some people who are more socially-oriented than others, and therefore feel a need to be active members of a “club”. So, I think this is acceptable for Christians to attend and “belong to” a Christian “club”. I also think it is admirable that Christian parents desire a wholesome Christian environment for the social lives of their children. Attending and belonging to a conventional “church” (club) is fine, if one understands and embraces the reality of what it is and is not. It’s a Christian “club” – it is not the Church Jesus is building.

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

Disciples of the King & His Kingdom

Discipleship to Christ has to do with the King and His Kingdom. Jesus spoke and taught much about His Kingdom. He spoke and taught very little about His Church.⁵³ That's because He didn't necessarily need to talk to us about how HE would build His Church. But He wanted to make clear to us that OUR COMMISSION IS DISCIPLESHIP - discipling all peoples to the King and His Kingdom. The focus must be on the King and His Kingdom because that's the gospel Jesus preached and that's the gospel He told His disciples to preach: **"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come."**⁵⁴ I understand that to be essentially the same commission given in Matthew 28:18-20. The commission is to disciple all peoples to the King and His Kingdom.

⁵³ Simply two verses: Matthew 16:18 & 18:17

⁵⁴ Matthew 24:14

“The Name”

THE NAME (or “names”) of God speak of His essence. Therefore, the essence of discipleship has to do with THE NAME – of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It’s not about the specific proper word for God’s name, nor for the proper spelling of God’s name. It’s about the essence of THE NAME.

The “Onoma”⁵⁵ is a concept which was of much more significance to the Jews and early Christians than to us today. That concept has to do with all that A NAME speaks of – IDENTITY - as well as one’s nature, character, authority, etc.

THE NAME, “Jesus”, is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshua, and is etymologically related to the name, Joshua, which expresses the IDENTITY of the Deliverer and Savior of the people⁵⁶. And this Savior is also the Anointed One - the **King** of a **Kingdom**. Therefore, His name, “Christ”, expresses the recognition of His POWER and AUTHORITY.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Strong’s # 3686

⁵⁶ Matthew 1:21

⁵⁷ I recommend an article by Kenny Burchard: “What’s the ‘Therefore’ There For?” <https://thinktheology.org/2016/01/06/whats-the-therefore-there-for-in-matthews-great-commission/>

In the Book of Revelation, there is a proclamation of the POWER and AUTHORITY of Christ: **“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.”**⁵⁸ But even before He left this earth Jesus made a very similar proclamation about His POWER and AUTHORITY: At the beginning of the Great Commission, Jesus said, **“All AUTHORITY has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”**⁵⁹ Then, He said **“THEREFORE”**⁶⁰, and proceeded with the rest of the commission – specifically, to **“disciple all peoples”**. These proclamations of Christ’s POWER and AUTHORITY point to the essence of discipleship – the AUTHORITY of THE KING and HIS KINGDOM.

Jesus is recorded as giving the Great Commission two times in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 24:14 He said we are to **preach the King and His Kingdom**: **“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness to all peoples.”** And in Matthew 28:20 He said we are to **“disciple all peoples”** to this **King and His Kingdom**.

⁵⁸ Revelation 11:15

⁵⁹ Matthew 28:18

⁶⁰ Matthew 28:19

In Matthew 13:52, after relating a series of Parables of the Kingdom, Jesus made a reference to “**disciples of the Kingdom**” - *not* disciples of the Church. As I said previously: Planting churches produces Christian club members, not disciples of Christ. Like Jesus and His apostles, our focus needs to be on the Kingdom – not on the Church. The Church is HIS business. Discipling all peoples to the King and His Kingdom is our commission.

HOW TO DISCIPLE

The HOW of discipleship is found in Matthew 28:19-20:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Here is a particular literal translation⁶¹:

Mat 28:19 Going G4198 then, G3767 disciple G3100 all G3956 the G3588 nations! G1484 immersing G907 them G1473 in G1519 the G3588 name G3686 of the G3588 father, G3962 and G2532 of the G3588 son, G5207 and G2532 of the G3588 holy G39 spirit. G4151

Mat 28:20 Teaching G1321 them G1473 to give heed to G5083 all G3956 as much as G3745 I gave charge G1781 to you. G1473 And G2532 behold, G2400 I G1473

[2with G3326 3you G1473 1am] G1510.2.1 all G3956 the G3588 days G2250 until G2193 the G3588 completion G4930 of the G3588 age. G165 Amen. G281

I would like to offer the following literal translation of Matthew 28:19-20a:

⁶¹ The Apostolic Bible Polyglot translation

“*Going*, disciple all peoples, *baptizing* them IN THE NAME of the father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁶²

In the Greek text, there is one imperative verb (without a noun) and three participles. The imperative verb is the word that tells us what to do. The three participles tell us how to do it. The imperative verb is “disciple”; and the three participles are “going”, “baptizing” and “teaching”.⁶³

“disciple”:

Again, this is not a noun, nor an object. It is an imperative verb without a noun or an object. It is not a result of our “making” something. It is a command – “disciple”. This is the imperative verb telling us what to do – “disciple”. But how?

⁶² I recommend another article by Kenny Burchard: “Greek-Geeking the Great Commission”.
<http://thinktheology.org/2013/11/07/greek-geeking-the-great-commission-in-matthew/>

⁶³ “disciple”: mathayteusatay - μαθητεύσατε. 1. “going”: poreuthentes – πορευθέντες 2. “baptizing”: baptidzontes – βαπτίζοντες 3. “teaching”: didaskontes – διδάσκοντες

Matthew wrote his gospel to a Jewish audience who, like Jesus Himself, were grounded in the “Shema” found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

“going”:

“Go”, in the Greek text is not a verb but a participle. “Going” is the more literal and accurate translation. As is clearly depicted in the “Shema”, the Lord intended that the discipling of His people was to take place “as you go” - “as you go about the various activities of your life”.

“baptizing” & “teaching”:

“Baptizing” and “teaching” in the Greek text are not verbs but are participles. The combined meaning is being immersed into Christ and His teaching. Again, from the Shema, which Jesus certainly wholeheartedly embraced, we can see that God’s intention was that His people would be “baptized” or immersed in Himself through a baptism, as it were, and an immersion in His word.⁶⁴

To be baptized in THE NAME (or “names”) of God is to be immersed in His CHARACTER, and to be overwhelmed in the experience of His POWER and AUTHORITY – to have one’s life totally bathed in the personal experience of Almighty God – experiencing the reality of His POWER and AUTHORITY in the spirit realm, earthly realm and within the realm of one’s own being, and to intimately experience the beauty of His NATURE and CHARACTER. Namely – TO KNOW GOD and live here and now in His Kingdom! **“Eternal Life – the Life of the Eternal One - is KNOWING GOD.”**⁶⁵ Authentic Christianity is receiving the

⁶⁴ With the New Covenant a baptism in His Spirit is also given.

⁶⁵ John 17:3

“Word of Life”, being born of “the living and abiding Word of God”⁶⁶, and being immersed into the kingdom of God here and now, which will continue into the age to come.

Indeed, when the apostles John and Paul write of their personal and collective experience of **“the Word of Life”** and **“the Word of Christ”**, would not the picture they are depicting with their words be best described as being **“baptized in His Name and Teaching – that is to say, totally immersed in Christ and His Body?”**⁶⁷

**“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life - and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us - what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ”.
These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.”**

1 John 1:1-4

⁶⁶ 1 Peter 1:23 ESV

⁶⁷ For a more complete discussion of this view of “baptism in Christ”, I highly recommend “The Papal and Hierarchical System compared with the Religion of the New Testament” by John Gurney (1843).

“Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Colossians 3:16

Matthew 28:20b:

“to observe (things) all that I have commanded”.⁶⁸

I think that most translations rightly communicate that the goal of discipleship is that disciples of Christ would observe - obey, do - what Jesus has commanded. But let's consider other or additional meanings within Jesus' words:

“to give heed to G5083 all G3956 as much as G3745 I gave charge G1781 to you.”⁶⁹

“... to watch over, keep and guard⁷⁰ all that I have put in your charge⁷¹”.

This adds a sense of the Lord giving His disciples a responsibility of preserving the heritage He had entrusted to them – His

⁶⁸ NASB, NKJV, ESV, AMP

⁶⁹ The Apostolic Bible Polyglot translation.

⁷⁰ Greek: *tereo*, Strong's # 5083.

⁷¹ Strong's # 1781

teachings – **“the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”**⁷² – precisely, authentic Christianity. This verse brings to mind other verses which also speak of discipleship:

This is what the apostle Paul wrote to one of his disciples:

“O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you.”⁷³ Disciples of Christ are to watch over, keep and guard what the Lord has entrusted to them and put in their charge.

Also, this is what the Spirit of the Lord said to Isaiah and the disciples the Lord had given him: **“Bind up the testimony, seal the law among My disciples”**.⁷⁴ Regarding this verse, I offer this commentary taken from my article, [A Remnant Will Return](#):

"Among My Disciples"

“The Holy Spirit directed that the word be "bound and sealed" "among My disciples". Why? While the Lord desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth",⁷⁵ He *entrusts* His "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" to His true disciples as

⁷² Jude 3 *New English Translation* (NET)

⁷³ 1 Timothy 6:20

⁷⁴ Isaiah 8:16

⁷⁵ 1 Timothy 2:4

curators of His word, while His knowledge and truth are "bound and sealed" *away from others*."

"In His *Parable of the Pearl* the Lord depicted His true disciples in this way: *'Upon finding one pearl of great value, (they) sell all that (they) have and buy it.'*⁷⁶ Those who are truly disciples of Christ recognize and revere the "great value of the pearl". This is what Jesus said to His disciples: *'To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.... blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.'*⁷⁷ In this way, the word of God is "bound and sealed" **"among His disciples"**, and "bound and sealed" *away from others*.

The difference has to do with recognizing and believing⁴ the precious value of what God has to say and give. As Peter said: *'This precious value, then, is for you who believe.'*⁷⁸ So, "the teaching"⁵ is "bound and sealed" **"among My disciples" because it is precious to them.**"

"Those who *'continue in the word of Christ, are truly disciples of Christ; they will know the truth, and the truth will make them free.'*⁷⁹ In comparison to the majority in the conventional churches, the true disciples of Christ have a spiritual abundance with regards to authentic knowledge of God, His word, and His ways. Yet, their "glory" is not in flaunting their spiritual "wisdom", or their spiritual "power", or their spiritual "riches". They are deeply

⁷⁶ Matthew 13:46)

⁷⁷ Cf. Matthew 13:10-17

⁷⁸ 1 Peter 2:7

⁷⁹ John 8:31-32

mindful that the preciousness and privilege which have been given to them is that **they "know and understand" God.**"⁸⁰

The Promise of Discipleship: Knowing God

The promise of Discipleship is nothing less than the promise of the New Covenant: KNOWING GOD. Why do I say that? Firstly because, that's the recorded prophetic promise of the New Covenant: **"They all shall KNOW ME."**⁸¹ Secondly because, that is the promise Jesus made to His disciples: **"If you love Me , you will keep My commandments"**⁸².... **He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him**⁸³.... **If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.**"⁸⁴

In this passage, the Lord speaks of *keeping* His commandments. In the Greek text, this is exactly the same word He later used in

⁸⁰ Jeremiah 9:23-24

⁸¹ Jeremiah 31:34

⁸² John 14:15

⁸³ John 14:21

⁸⁴ John 14:23

the Great Commission: “... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you....”⁸⁵

It is clear that the purpose of Discipleship is Loving Obedience – *obeying the Lord because we love Him*. But notice that Jesus said the outcome of this loving obedience would be three-fold:

- 1) We will be loved by both Jesus and the Father.
- 2) Jesus will “disclose” – “reveal”⁸⁶ - Himself to us.
- 3) Jesus and the Father will dwell within us (Their Spirit in our spirit).

But surely it is true that Jesus and the Father love all those in the world: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son....”⁸⁷ So, we can understand why “Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?’”⁸⁸ In response to this, Jesus simply repeated what He had previously said – which is the condition of the promise – specifically: “If anyone loves Me he will keep my word.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Greek: *tereo*, Strong’s # 5083.

⁸⁶ Likely a better translation of the Greek word, *emphanzio*, Strong’s # 1718. Not merely disclose through words, but manifest to the sight, reveal in person. (M.R. Vincent)

⁸⁷ John 3:16

⁸⁸ John 14:22

⁸⁹ John 14:23

This is the understanding: God loves all those in the world, and desires to reveal Himself to them and dwell within them. But only those who obey and love Him are able to recognize Him, receive His love, and experience His indwelling presence. This need not cause us to stumble theologically. Possibly, this may help us understand: A parent loves a child. The child loves the parent. But when there is a matter of disobedience, there is a “barrier” in the relationship. The parent’s love doesn’t cease; but the child’s experience of the love is obstructed, and for the child, the whole of the relationship is mired until the matter is resolved through repentance and forgiveness.

But again, for the loving, obedient disciple of Christ, this is the three-fold promise of Christ:

- 1) Living in **the on-going experience of the love** of Jesus and the Father.
- 2) Receiving **on-going revelation** of Christ.
- 3) Experiencing **the in-dwelling** of Jesus and the Father (Their Spirit in our spirit).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Being “in Christ” and having “Christ in you”.

Considering these various New Testament scriptures, I think it accurate to say that this three-fold statement is summarized by what the Holy Spirit prophesied in the Old Testament scripture: “They all shall KNOW ME”.⁹¹ This is both the promise of the New Covenant – and the promise of Discipleship.

But now, let’s continue on with more about HOW TO DISCIPLE –
In Light of the New Covenant.

⁹¹ Jeremiah 31:34

Discipling in Light of the New Covenant

³¹ “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. ³³ “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” Jeremiah 31:31-34

As previously stated, the promise of Discipleship is nothing less than the promise of the New Covenant: KNOWING GOD.

Therefore, in light of the New Covenant, the goal of discipling should also be TO KNOW GOD - not to make someone into some pre-conceived image of what a “disciple” should look like.

Discipling in light of the New Covenant is not having someone do this or that. Neither is it having someone live this way or that way.

This is Old Covenant – “according to the letter”.⁹² Discipling in light of the New Covenant is modeling your knowledge of the Holy One with someone - sharing with someone your relationship with the Lord.

If, through various means and methods, I prescribe for someone to do or that, or live this way or that way, then I have modeled the Moses of the Old Covenant, not the Jesus of the New Covenant. I have “played God” – I have acted as their lord – usurping the Spirit of Christ.

But, through sharing my knowledge and experience of God, if I can help cultivate someone’s personal relationship with God, and help nurture someone’s experiential knowledge of God, then the Spirit of Christ can mold that one into the unique “disciple” which He would have him to be. And that disciple of Christ will respond to the Spirit of Christ - by living out God’s will - unique to his life. God will be glorified, not me - and not my particular discipleship methodology.

⁹² 2 Corinthians 2:6-11

Servants of a New Covenant

- “not of the letter, but of the Spirit”

3 “Being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. 4 Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, 6 who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

2 Corinthians 3:3-6

New Covenant discipleship is a ministry “not of the letter, but of the Spirit”. New Covenant discipling cannot be “of the letter” – that is, not through the imposition of various means and methods, because the “letter” – *imposed externally upon the disciple* - brings death. This is NOT to say that the teaching of scripture is not employed in discipling. But this IS to say that it is only the Spirit of Christ – *residing internally in the disciple* - who can bring the word of Christ into the heart and life of a disciple⁹³, making it a living and manifest “letter of Christ”. “The Spirit gives life”.

Therefore, in discipling, there must always be a sensitivity to, a

⁹³ The Word of Christ dwelling internally: Jeremiah 31:33-34; Hebrews 8:10-11; Romans 10:17; Colossians 3:16.

perceiving of, and a co-laboring with the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the disciple.

The Discipline of Discipleship: Abiding in the Word of Christ

As much as I am excited by and committed to a New Covenant approach to discipleship, I would be amiss to give the impression that I devalue the necessity of spiritual disciplines. I think the key is approaching the spiritual discipline, not as employing a methodology, but rather as cultivating a relationship with Christ. It is essentially allowing Jesus to be Lord of one's life – in reality. It is giving the Spirit of Christ opportunity – that is, time and energy spent in spirit, soul, and body – to nurture and cultivate one's life.

A primary spiritual discipline in discipleship is **study of the Word of Christ**. A “disciple”⁹⁴ is literally a “learner”⁹⁵. Greek scholar, W.E. Vine, says that the word denotes “one who follows one's teaching”. “The fellowship of the Spirit” and study of the Word of Christ are the two integral components of discipleship. There is no

⁹⁴ Greek: *mathes*, Strong's # 3101

⁹⁵ *W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

discipleship without learning through teachings and study. A disciple of Christ is devoted to learning the Word of Christ.

“If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine.”⁹⁶

According to Greek scholar, James Strong, the Greek word translated “continue”⁹⁷ is “a primary verb; to *stay*, **abide**, continue, **dwell**, endure, **be present**, remain, stand”. Particularly the words “be present”, “abide” and “dwell” connote being baptized – immersed – in the teachings of Christ.

Jesus TAUGHT His disciples. And He instructed His apostles to teach all that He had entrusted to them.⁹⁸ The first century disciples were “continually devoting themselves to apostles’ teaching”.⁹⁹ One literal translation renders that phrase as such: Act 2:42 And they were G1510.7.6 G1161 attending constantly G4342 in the G3588 teaching G1322 of the G3588 apostles. G652¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ John 8:31b

⁹⁷ Greek: *meno*, Strong’s # 3306.

⁹⁸ Matthew 28:20

⁹⁹ Acts 2:42

¹⁰⁰ The Apostolic Bible Polyglot

This rendering possibly refers to attending teachings taking place in the temple and in houses.¹⁰¹ But what is of more significance was the precedence placed on teaching and study: The phrase “attending constantly” may also be translated: “**earnest towards**” or “**constantly diligent to**”¹⁰² – teaching and study. But what were the apostles teaching? If you had followed Jesus for 3 ½ years and listened to His teachings, what would you teach?¹⁰³ Of course! – they taught what Jesus taught them. I will discuss further the term “Apostolic Teaching” later in this article.

The Discipline of Discipleship:

“The Fellowship of the Spirit”¹⁰⁴.

I have written in greater detail on The Fellowship of the Spirit¹⁰⁵ in another article from which I quote this excerpt:

“True fellowship does not originate in people. It originates in the Holy Spirit. It is something He gives to us. It is a gift of the Spirit. In the phrase “**the fellowship of the Spirit**”, the

¹⁰¹ Acts 2:46; 5:42. Later, the apostle Paul also taught in a “school” (Acts 19:9-10) and in houses (Acts 20:20).

¹⁰² Greek: *proskartereo*, Strong’s # 4342. (*Strong’s Greek Dictionary*)

¹⁰³ Or better: “If you are a disciple of Christ, what should you teach?”

¹⁰⁴ 2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1.

¹⁰⁵ A recorded version is posted on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqqgLoR1u94> A complimentary .pdf copy can be obtained by emailing: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

preposition “of” designates genitive case, showing possession. There are many uses of the genitive case in Greek. In commentaries, I find much variance of opinion regarding the particular uses of the genitive case in certain passages. Personally, I’m inclined to see this as a *possessive genitive*, that is to say, the fellowship belongs to the Holy Spirit. According to Kenneth Wuest, this is certainly the case in a related verse in 1 Corinthians 1:9 he says: ‘It is the possessive genitive here, namely, into a communion or joint-participation **belonging to** His Son...’¹⁰⁶ I would tend to give a similar interpretation to Philippians 2:1.

But it may be *subjective genitive*, that is to say, the fellowship is something the Holy Spirit is doing. And, it may also be *plenary genitive*, that is to say, the fellowship is something both we and the Holy Spirit are doing. I’m blessed by all three possibilities!

Kenneth Wuest describes “**the fellowship of the Spirit**” in this way: ‘A common interest and a mutual and active participation in the things of God in which the believer and the Holy Spirit are joint-participants’.¹⁰⁷ And we can summarize W.E. Vines comments on “**the fellowship of the Spirit**” in this way: A mutual companionship between the Holy Spirit and ourselves, in which we have communion and two-way communication with the Holy Spirit as a means of partaking of the life of the Spirit.¹⁰⁸ It is “life in the Spirit”, or what the Scripture refers to as “walking in the Spirit” and “praying in the Spirit”¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁶ Wuest Word Studies: *Untranslatable Riches*, p. 98-99

¹⁰⁷ *Word Studies: Philippians*, p.57

¹⁰⁸ *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*

¹⁰⁹ I agree with the distinction made between “praying in the Spirit” and “praying with the spirit” by Arthur Wallace in his book, “*Pray in the Spirit*”. “In the Spirit”: Ephesians 6:18; Jude 1:20. “With the spirit”: 1 Corinthians 14:14-15.

Fellowship is *not primarily* something taking place BETWEEN people. It is something which people are participating together IN. Fellowship is *not merely* sharing with one another. Fellowship is **sharing or participating together in something which we have in common**. And that “something” which people are participating together in is the life of the Holy Spirit.

For the Holy Spirit is the only One who gives the life of Christ which sustains His Body.¹¹⁰ Jesus also told us that the Holy Spirit would ‘*take of what is Mine and declare it to you*’.¹¹¹ So, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” is people **participating in what the Holy Spirit is saying and doing** – He shares with us the life of Christ, and we share that with one another.

So, the fellowship of the Spirit has to do with our personal relationship with the Holy Spirit and our personal devotional life, consisting of the various spiritual disciplines, which John Wesley referred to as ‘holy habits’.¹¹²

The life OF the Spirit and life IN the Spirit is definitive of the New Covenant. Discipling methodologies can never measure up to New Covenant Discipleship. Yet, there is discipline, in the sense of making oneself available to the Spirit – both the one being discipled and the one discipling.

¹¹⁰ John 6:63; 2 Corinthians 3:6

¹¹¹ John 16:13-15

¹¹² An excerpt quoted from [The Fellowship of the Spirit](#) (Audio Version). A complimentary .pdf copy can be obtained by emailing: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

The Context of Discipleship: Life

These are the words of the apostle Paul: **“The Spirit gives life”**.¹¹³ These are also the words of Jesus to His disciples: **“The Spirit gives life.”**¹¹⁴ I cannot express how significant it is to understand “life as a principle” in order to understand the New Covenant – and New Covenant Discipleship. “Life as a principle” is the very nature of the New Covenant and that which distinguishes it from the Old Covenant.¹¹⁵ Regarding “life as a principle”, I would like to offer this excerpt from my article *The Fellowship of the Spirit*:

“The fact that the Spirit gives life is inherent to **the fellowship of the Spirit**. In other words, in order to understand **the fellowship of the Spirit**, we must also understand the life of the Spirit. So, by way of introduction, I’d like to discuss what I am going to refer to as “Life as a Principle”:

¹¹³ 2 Corinthians 3:6b

¹¹⁴ John 6:63a

¹¹⁵ As I endeavored to communicate in the article *The Fellowship of the Spirit*, as well as the series of articles, [A New & Living Way](#), the lack of understanding of “life as a principle” has the majority of church ministries still operating under the veil of the Old Covenant. In contrast to being according to “the letter”, New Covenant church life “according to the Spirit” is “organic”.

Jesus said: **“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”**¹¹⁶ God created human beings to live life in “a trinity of dimensions”: physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual.

Those who are not “born of the Spirit”, that is, those who are not regenerated¹¹⁷, essentially do not experience life in the spiritual dimension, which is the *source and reality* behind the physical, mental, and emotional dimensions. They live life on a superficial level, unaware of the realities of the spiritual realms. The apostle John said: **“He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”**¹¹⁸

When Jesus spoke of **“having (life) abundantly”**, I believe He essentially meant **continuously receiving the spiritual life of God** from the Holy Spirit. I use the word “continuously” because of what is expressed in Jesus’ saying, which He quoted from the Old Testament: **“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”**¹¹⁹ The tense of the Greek verb translated “proceeds” is the *present continuous sense*¹²⁰, implying that the Creator God is *continually* creating life by His words as He did in the beginning. The **“fellowship of the Spirit”** is **“walking in the Spirit”**, participating in the **“Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus”**¹²¹, and continuously receiving His words that are **“spirit and life”**¹²².

¹¹⁶ John 10:10

¹¹⁷ John 3:3-8

¹¹⁸ 1 John 5:12

¹¹⁹ Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3

¹²⁰ Greek: *ekporeuomi*, Strong’s # 1607

¹²¹ Romans 8:2

¹²² John 6:63

The idea that Christianity is first and foremost participation in the life of the Spirit, was germane to apostolic evangelism: An angel instructed the apostles: **"Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life."**¹²³

Let's look further into Jesus' statement:

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life."

"It is the Spirit who gives **life....**" The Greek word that is translated "life" here is *zoe*.¹²⁴ Of this word, W.E. Vine says: 'Zoe is used in the New Testament of *life as a principle*, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself. (John 5:26)'¹²⁵ This is the life which the Spirit gives – the life of God, the life of Christ.¹²⁶ The Spirit gives spiritual life. There are other dimensions of life – physical, mental/emotional, which are associated with different Greek words.¹²⁷ But when we discuss "the fellowship of the Spirit", we are discussing spiritual life - life in the Spirit.

In John 4, Jesus said: **"God is Spirit, and those who worship (or serve) Him, must worship in spirit and truth."**¹²⁸ And in John 6, Jesus said: **"... the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have**

¹²³ Acts 5:20

¹²⁴ Strong's # 2222

¹²⁵ Most quotes regarding Greek words will be from W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*.

¹²⁶ The triune God is One. The life of the Father God is the life of Christ and the (Holy) Spirit of life. The "God (who) is Spirit" (John 4:24) is the Spirit of Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit.

¹²⁷ *Bios* (# 979) and *psuche* (# 5590) respectively. Most comments regarding Greek words will be based on W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*.

¹²⁸ Verse 24

spoken to you are spirit and are life.”¹²⁹ Jesus said that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual life; but He also indicated that **the words which He speaks also give spiritual life**. This too is key to understanding the essence of **the fellowship of the Spirit**. Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would **“take of what is Mine and declare it to you”**.¹³⁰ So, in “the fellowship of the Spirit”, the Holy Spirit shares the life-giving words of Jesus (with His disciples). **“It is the Spirit who gives life”¹³¹** – the Holy Spirit is the only One who gives the life of Christ which sustains (His disciples), **“for in Him we live and move and have our being”¹³²**.

Along with the above excerpt, I would like to add that “life as a principle” was given to God’s people even back in the Old Covenant. This passage from the Old Testament clearly communicates that **the Context of Discipleship is Life** – explicitly, that **discipling take place in the context of everyday life**, for the desired outcome was that THE LIFE OF THE DISCIPLE BE IMMERSSED (BAPTIZED) WITH THE WORD AND THE LIFE OF GOD:

6 “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. 7 You shall *teach them diligently to your sons and*

¹²⁹ Verse 63

¹³⁰ John 16:13-15

¹³¹ John 6:63; 2 Corinthians 3:6

¹³² Acts 17:28

shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”¹³³

“Life as a principle” – the concept of the Spirit giving life, that is, the life of God¹³⁴ - is realized IN THE MIDST OF LIFE, THE SPIRIT INFUSES THE LIFE OF GOD. This is God’s desired outcome in the New Covenant. Currently, it is popular to speak of this as “organic”, meaning an outcome *born out of life*, as opposed to a product of methods and programs.¹³⁵

The Desire for Discipleship: Seeking God

The Desire for Discipleship is essentially a desire for “the fellowship of the Spirit”, as it has been discussed. This desire is an absolute pre-requisite which arises out of a sense of need for and love for the Lord. I believe Jesus referred to this *sense of need* when He spoke of the character trait – “poor in spirit”¹³⁶.

There are two different Greek words that are both translated

¹³³ Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

¹³⁴ Greek: *zoe*, Strong’s # 2222 – “life as a principle” (W.E. Vine).

¹³⁵ With regards to corporate or collective church life, the term “organic” refers to an “organism” as distinguished from an organization.

¹³⁶ Matthew 5:3. See my book [The Character of the King & His Kingdom: The Beatitudes](https://www.AtChristsTable.org).

“poor”: The first is *penichros*,¹³⁷ from *penomai*: to work for one’s daily bread, that is to say, to be needy. In other words, one is able to work and earn a living; but just needs a little help today. The other word is *ptochos*,¹³⁸ from *ptocheuo*: to be as a beggar. In other words, one has no work and cannot earn a living - he must beg. This is the poverty of spirit that understands **“the kindness and tolerance and patience of God which leads to repentance”**¹³⁹ which is a pre-requisite to saving faith. Truly, this is a character trait of a disciple of Christ.

The connection between a **sense of need and a love for God** is demonstrated in an event involving Jesus, a prostitute and a Pharisee.¹⁴⁰ This was followed by Jesus speaking a parable about a money lender and two debtors.¹⁴¹ Jesus then compared the Pharisee with the prostitute;¹⁴² and concluded with this statement: **“He who has been forgiven little, loves little.”**¹⁴³ The Pharisee, who was not “poor in spirit” demonstrated no love for God. The prostitute, who was poor in spirit, demonstrated much love for

¹³⁷ Strong’s # 3998

¹³⁸ Strong’s # 4434

¹³⁹ Romans 2:4

¹⁴⁰ Luke 7:36-39

¹⁴¹ Luke 7:40-42

¹⁴² Luke 7:44-47a

¹⁴³ Luke 7:47b

Jesus. In fact, the scripture says that when the woman learned that Jesus was at the Pharisee's house, she came SEEKING Jesus.¹⁴⁴ Her sense of need created a desire in her to SEEK GOD. As I said, this is an absolute pre-requisite in discipleship.

The Responsibility of Discipleship: Seeking and Learning Christ

About 25 years ago, I took a particular course on Christian Education.¹⁴⁵ One of the things mentioned in this course which made an impression on me and has stayed with me all these years is this statement: **"It is the teacher's responsibility to teach; and it is the student's responsibility to learn."** A necessary component of discipleship is personal responsibility. All that has been said about the WHAT and HOW of discipleship is really of no avail without authentic SEEKING GOD on the part of the disciple. While it does involve those who do the "discipling", discipleship is ultimately an activity taking place between God and the disciple.

¹⁴⁴ Luke 7:37

¹⁴⁵ Accelerated Christian Education (Hendersonville, TN.), *"Philosophy of Education"*.

While relationship with Christ is something the Lord is jealous for, at the same time, discipleship to Christ is a commission the Lord has given to apostolic people¹⁴⁶. While one is to be a disciple of Christ, there are certain people who are also involved in the “discipling” activity. And while Christ is the Chief Shepherd, there are those whom the Lord has appointed to be shepherds in His household.

Thus, if a disciple is fervently seeking God, he will also recognize, appreciate and seek out an “older one”¹⁴⁷ in the Lord to help nurture and cultivate – mentor – this discipleship he has going on with the Lord.¹⁴⁸ So, in a very real way, seeking the Lord involves **seeking out and “pressing into” a shepherd or mentor –** *appreciating and recognizing that someone can lay a foundation of Christ and build upon that foundation with revelation, relationship and reflection of Christ.* This appreciation and recognition on the part of the disciple is absolutely pre-requisite to discipleship. Without it, no discipling can take place. With it, the

¹⁴⁶ It is worth noting that the commission to make disciples was given to apostles. If it is understood to be a commission given to ALL Christians, then I would argue that ALL Christians need to be “apostolic”, as we have been discussing the term.

¹⁴⁷ “Elder” (*presbuteros*, Strong’s # 4245), “shepherd” (*poimen*, Strong’s # 4166), and “overseer” (*episkopos*, Strong’s # 1985) are all titles, or better, functions which describe one and the same person. Acts 20:17 & 28; Titus 1:5 & 7.

¹⁴⁸ See my article [Christ-centered Discipleship & Equipping Ministries](https://www.AtChristsTable.org).

disciple *draws upon that which is of Christ* from the one doing the discipling. Discipleship cannot be accomplished solely by the activities of the one doing the discipling – it requires the disciple seeking out, pressing into, and drawing upon the one doing the discipling. The one discipling must allow (and require) the disciple to always take his measure of personal responsibility in the discipleship process.

I think a good case in point is this: Discipling requires teaching.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, it is perfectly natural and good for a disciple to “sit under” the teaching of the one discipling.¹⁵⁰ But as I previously stated - **“It is the teacher’s responsibility to teach; and it is the student’s responsibility to learn.”** The disciple must have a personal desire for teaching and learning – devoting personal time and energy to transformational learning. Merely “showing up to class” to “sit under” someone and be “spoon-fed” teachings will NOT have authentic discipleship outcomes. In fact, I think it can

¹⁴⁹ As I have pointed out in my article, [Foundation Stones](#), in recent times and in certain quarters, the necessity for “sound doctrine” and teaching in general has lost the esteem it once held in previous times in church history. Never-the-less, Jesus and His apostles taught disciples. So, regardless of varying trends and emphases in conventional churches, discipling always has and always will require teaching. Therefore, he who disciplines must be “able to teach”. 1 Timothy 3:2

¹⁵⁰ But the reality is, the Spirit of Christ will lead the disciple to the teachings of others as well – through books, recordings, videos, and the Internet.

be wise for the one doing the discipling to make his teachings available in written and recorded formats, but have it be the disciple's personal responsibility to "seek out" the teaching, making it "his own", doing further study, and receiving personal revelation, all with a view to transformational learning. This approach to discipleship is a long-term process which requires the utmost patience. This may be challenging and frustrating for the one doing the discipling. But, in the discipleship process, he must never seize control away from the Spirit of Christ, usurp possession of the disciple away from the Person of Christ.

WHO TO DISCIPLE

“... disciple all nations”

Let's now consider the question of “Who am I to disciple?” Jesus gave us a “wide-lens” perspective when He said, “disciple all nations”. Firstly, what did He mean by “all nations”?

Grammatically speaking, the Greek word translated “nations” is *ethnos*,¹⁵¹ which means a tribe, a race, a people, specifically non-Jewish. Jesus meant for us to disciple “all peoples” – indicating that with the New Covenant in His blood, God's Spirit and life would no longer be limited solely to the people of Israel.¹⁵²

I don't believe that whole nations (collectively) are the object. The New Covenant which Jesus established has all to do with INDIVIDUALS *within* all nations – not a whole nation collectively. Why (or how) can I say that? I believe the Lord God said that. Through His prophets, He told us the nature of this New Covenant would be the INDIVIDUAL, not the collective nation, as he did with

¹⁵¹ Strong's # 1484. “a *race*, that is, a *tribe*; specifically, a *foreign (non-Jewish)* one (usually by implication *pagan*): - Gentile, heathen, nation, people. (Strong's Dictionary).

¹⁵² Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21; Cf. Acts 1:8, 2:5; 9:15; 10:34-35; 11:18; 13:48-49; 15:7-12, 13-18 (Amos 9:11-12).

Israel in the Old Covenant. This is made clear in the primary Old Testament passage regarding the coming of a New Covenant:

29“In those days they will not say again, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ 30“But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge. 31“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. 33“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart, I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34“They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all¹⁵³ know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”¹⁵⁴

The focus on the individual, rather than the collective nation, we see here in Jeremiah is also confirmed by Ezekiel.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ i.e. Every individual who is in the New Covenant by virtue of being in Christ.

¹⁵⁴ Jeremiah 31:29-34

¹⁵⁵ Ezekiel 18:1-4, 20.

Choosing “Those whom the Lord has given”

Discipling is a huge investment of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. A discipling relationship should not be entered into glibly. Also: One cannot effectively handle many discipling relationships at a time. Jesus had twelve. Can I handle even half that number?

Over the years, the Holy Spirit impressed upon me two things regarding the discipling ministry which, at first, may sound contradictory:

Firstly, I became convinced that one should choose those whom you would disciple. Jesus is our Pattern; and He chose His disciples. Mark tells us: “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve”¹⁵⁶ Luke gives us another piece of information which proves to be significant: “It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God. And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them....”¹⁵⁷ Jesus

¹⁵⁶ Mark 3:13-14

¹⁵⁷ Luke 6:12-13

sought the Father in prayer; and the Father told Jesus whom to disciple.

In the words of Isaiah (which have become very personal and meaningful to me), Jesus chose **“those whom the Lord has given”**.¹⁵⁸ This was the second thing the Holy Spirit impressed upon me: WHO we disciple should be **“those whom the Lord has given”**. But how do we recognize **“those whom the Lord has given”**? Admittedly, by virtue of His oneness with the Father, the process was more inherent for Jesus, but I have learned the following:

- 1) As with all guidance from the Lord, **“because of practice, (you) have your senses trained”**¹⁵⁹ – that is, you have **“disciplined (yourself) for the purpose of godliness”**,¹⁶⁰ and have learned to be **“led by the Spirit”**,¹⁶¹ recognizing what the Holy Spirit is saying and doing.
- 2) Let the person share his heart and mind. See what it is that he is actually desiring. Is it truly discipleship he is seeking? Is it Revelation, Relationship and Reflection of Christ he is seeking?

¹⁵⁸ Isaiah 8:18

¹⁵⁹ Hebrews 5:14

¹⁶⁰ 1 Timothy 4:7

¹⁶¹ Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18

Or is it merely some form of self- aggrandizement through the pursuit of spiritual people, places, and things?

3) Knowing the nature of discipleship, as we have been discussing it, helps in recognizing those who are truly seeking discipleship.

So, which is it with discipling relationships? CHOSEN or GIVEN? Both. Through spiritual discernment, I endeavor to recognize “those whom the Lord has given” and base my “choices” upon that recognition in the Spirit.

Another word about **“those whom the Lord has given”**:

Who has the Lord already “given” to you? Your own children! And these may be your biological children, stepchildren, legally adopted children, or informally “adopted” children. The Kingdom of God - God’s Household – is populated by the Family of God. The “family” is an institution created by God. It is God’s desire that your biological (or nuclear) family also be a spiritual family.

Likewise, spiritual parents – those who disciple others – have spiritual families which are based on relationship rather than organization. Thus, your spiritual family is ALL **“those whom the**

Lord has given” – both biological and spiritual children - whom you are discipling. Like biological families, spiritual families can also be “flawed”; but are characterized by the grace and redemption of God.

“Those whom the Lord has given” Online: The New “Local”

I am remembering a conversation that took place about 20 years ago: I had a part-time job in a Christian bookstore; and while talking with a co-worker, who was considerably younger than myself, she mentioned “an online friend”. I interrupted her saying, “What do you mean, ‘an online *friend*’.” I told her I could not imagine using the term “friend” for someone I knew only on the Internet. I realized then that the definition of “friend”, or at least the dynamics of “friendship”, had changed for those in the younger generations, who spent much more time communicating on the Internet than I had at that point in my life. Well, needless to say, 20 years later, I also have come to spend much more time communicating on the Internet; and in very recent years, Internet communication has become a major vehicle in the work of ministry. I now also have many “online friendships” with Christians

literally all over the world.¹⁶² And, I now have no problem referring to a good many of these people as “friends”. In my estimation, the quality and quantity of our communication with one another exceeds that which I share with many “offline friends”. I realize that not everyone is highly active communicating on the Internet; but this can only be said of older generations. It does not apply to younger generations – all over the world, almost all younger people are highly active communicating on the Internet. Conventional methodologies assign discipleship to the arena of “the local church”. I would like to suggest that the conventional perception of “local church” needs to be reconsidered in light of the Kingdom of God and the New Covenant.¹⁶³ If the concept of “local church” is going to be associated with discipling at all, then I suggest that, in discerning **“those whom the Lord has given”**, we consider what relationships we see already established in our lives which are NOT LIMITED TO those relationships we have in what is conventionally considered the “local church”.

¹⁶² Some, I have known “in person” for years when we lived in another country or another state, but now relate to them primarily on the Internet. Others, I have never met “in person”, yet have been communicating with them for years on the Internet.

¹⁶³ Suggested reading: My series of articles entitled, [A New & Living Way](#), as well as *Custom & Command* by Stan Firth, and *Kingdom Through Covenant*, by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum.

Discipling takes place in the arena of the Kingdom of God - the Household of God – the Family of God - even with people who are not yet regenerated Christians. Those people are *potentially* regenerated Christians¹⁶⁴ – that is, those whom we are evangelizing – giving witness to and teaching Christ to. Discipleship can begin even before regeneration. I must admit that this perspective is relatively new to me – I had always considered discipleship only for “real” and “serious” Christians. But, while discipleship IS “real” Christianity and IS “serious” Christianity, I cannot give a scriptural basis in support of discipleship being only for regenerated Christians. In fact, when Jesus clearly set out the terms of discipleship – precisely: **“Take up your cross daily, deny yourself, lose your life for My sake”** - He said that to His disciples BEFORE THEY WERE REGENERATED.¹⁶⁵ But, He set out the same terms of discipleship to crowds of PEOPLE WHO HAD NOT YET MADE A COMMITMENT TO HIS LORDSHIP AS WELL.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ I have quite intentionally used the term, “potentially”, in light of scripture passages such as, John 3:3-8 and Romans 8:9-17, which clearly define a “Christian” – “in the Kingdom of God” and “in the Family of God” - as one who has received the Spirit of Christ and been regenerated.

¹⁶⁵ Matthew 10:38-39, 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24.

¹⁶⁶ Mark 8:34-35 (Cf. v. 34); Luke 14:27 (Cf. v.25)

It may be that most discipling relationships are "local", in the conventional sense of the word. But who are those in "our locality"? People we relate to only at school or work? People we relate to only once or twice per week at church meetings? I would like to suggest that "local" should be redefined to mean those with whom we spend the most time relating to.¹⁶⁷ I doubt there should be any debating the fact that we "relate" much more with some people via various Internet formats¹⁶⁸ than with some other people who are "local" in the conventional sense. I believe it would be difficult to make a convincing argument that physical locality truly affords much more "authenticity" and "accountability". I certainly do not believe that to be true – even after more than 45 years of experience in "local churches". How often do we see those in our "local church"? How much heart-to-heart interaction and mind to mind communication actually takes place in a Sunday morning "worship service" or Tuesday night prayer meeting or Wednesday night Bible study, or even a Friday night cell group meeting?

¹⁶⁷ In Old Testament and New Testament times, people related almost exclusively with those who were literally local, unless they were nomadic or migratory. It was more or less the same throughout most of human history up to the time of the inventions of boats, automobiles, airplanes, and of course, the Internet.

¹⁶⁸ Not merely Facebook and Twitter, but also blog sites, websites, as well as, audio and video recordings, "podcasts", and video conferencing, et. al., but particularly, emailing personal letters, articles, notes, etc.

Either by direct personal experience in the practice of letter writing, or by reading the published letters of various personalities, one can see that written communication affords the possibility of the depth and width of human communication in both quality and quantity. Granted, too often the communication taking place on the various Internet formats is in “sound bites” and images, but this “dumbed-down” form of communication is not universally the case, and it is certainly not a necessity. The various Internet formats actually present multiple vehicles for effective and enhanced communication. The Internet is simply what you make it.

Personally, I highly esteem my “online friendships” – some of which have been maintained for 20 years – as the content of our communications far exceeds most of what I have experienced in “local church” times of sharing. If one is so motivated, communication via the various Internet formats can be – and is – much more engaging and of higher quality than the standard fare that takes place at “church meetings”.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Again, I am well-aware of the nonsense posted on various social media sites. But, again, that does not have to be the case, and is decidedly not always the case. I am firmly convinced that the Internet, for better or worse, is simply what you make it.

I know this is controversial and vulnerable to criticism, but I am suggesting that our perception, understanding, practice, and working definition of the "local expression of the universal Body of Christ" be reconsidered to be not as limiting as the conventional church claims it to be.¹⁷⁰

The Scriptures do tell us what we should be doing together. BUT – that is definitely contingent upon what people make themselves available to do together, and what the context of the gathering allows us to do together. Instead of what we conventionally do in "worship services" when we "go to church", we should be obeying the Lord's commission – **"disciple all peoples"**, as well as **"not forsaking our own assembling together"**¹⁷¹ **with "those whom the Lord has given"**.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Regarding this concept of "local", I would highly recommend an article by Chip Brogden entitled *"Family, Fellowship, and Leadership"*: <https://www.chipbrogden.com/family-fellowship-and-leadership/>

¹⁷¹ Hebrews 10:25. I suggest the commentary by Peter Ditzel, *"Hebrews 10:25: What are We Not to Forsake?"*: https://www.wordofthisgrace.org/wp/hebrews_1025/ What we are not to forsake is our hope - our hope of gathering together with Christ at His Return. Greek: *episunagoge*, Strong's # 1997. Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, Matthew 24:30-31, Mark 13:26-27. Every mention of this word is in reference to gathering with Christ. There is no scripture in the New Testament – including Hebrews 10:25 – which tells us to "not forsake going to church".

¹⁷² Isaiah 8:18

THE FRUIT OF DISCIPLESHIP

Each relationship – including those with one's biological children – is significantly unique and different. The spiritual quality and fruit in a ministry relationship will vary according to the quality of ...

- humility
- teachability
- earnest desire

... on the part of the one being disciplined.

Also, the spiritual quality and fruit in a ministry relationship will vary according to the quality of ...

- love (self-denial)
- patience
- sensitivity
- experience
- wisdom

... of the one doing the discipling.

The one who would disciple cannot give what he does not have.
The one who would be disciplined will only receive what he desires

to receive. This is true in all relationships; and it is true in all forms of ministry.

It seems that, in our present generation, relatively few young people are SEEKING mentorship from older Christians.¹⁷³ Of course, it may also be said that relatively few older Christians are making themselves AVAILABLE for mentorship of young people. In any case, more and more, we have people mentoring themselves primarily via surfing the Internet. The Internet can be a great source of information; but to that information needs to be added insight, understanding, discernment, and discretion in order to arrive at wisdom. Wisdom is knowing God and walking in His ways.¹⁷⁴ A significant aspect of the pursuit of wisdom is intentional SEEKING OUT a mentoring discipleship relationship with older Christians, and DRAWING OUT from them that which

¹⁷³ Various forms of the word “fool” appear in the Book of Proverbs 189 times. The word simply means someone who is not teachable - i.e. not teachable by some authority figure. That person insists on learning solely through personal experience, rather than ALSO through the personal experience of some authority figure. Fools are those who may or may not learn from their own mistakes. Of course, one must interact and relate to the “right” authority figure. As far as beginning to identify “the right authority figure” goes - one needs to bear in mind that “the fool says in his heart there is no God”. (Psalms 14:1 & 53:1) “The beginning of wisdom is reverential respect of God.” (Proverbs 9:10, Psalm 111:10). This “godliness” (Greek: *theosebeia*, Strong’s # 2317, reverential respect for God) must be characteristic of both the one being disciplined and the one discipling.

¹⁷⁴ Proverbs 9:10 (Cf. 30:3); Psalms 95:10 (Cf. Hebrews 3:10). I deal more fully with the components, as well as nature and definition of wisdom in my teaching, “*Wisdom*”. For a complimentary copy of the teaching notes in .pdf format, email: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

is of Christ. In my experience, young people who understand and appreciate this spiritual reality, and are motivated to SEEK OUT and DRAW OUT Christ in a mentoring relationship with older Christians, are fairly rare. As with godly biological children, godly spiritual children are also wonderful blessings to those who disciple.¹⁷⁵ This is the greatest blessing: Through discipling **“those whom the Lord has given”**, my wife and I have been afforded the opportunity to learn much of the Father’s heart and the mind of Christ.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Psalms 127 & 128.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. The audio message, [The Father’s Heart](#) For a complimentary copy of **The Father’s Heart** in .pdf format, email: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

Notes from a Case Study¹⁷⁷

In November of 2017, my wife and I, along with our daughter-in-law, traveled together by car approximately 3000 miles (to and fro) in response to two separate family crises. The somberness of the two situations and the extended time together in the car (approximately 7 days in total) afforded some significant conversations about life and the things of God. As these conversations took place, I was silently having a conversation with myself – “taking notes”, as it were, on how this discipling was taking place in our relationship with our daughter-in-law. Below are some notes I made to myself:

- Discipling is cultivating “those whom the Lord has given”. (A phrase which will be explained later in the article)
- From an elder’s perspective, the ministry of discipleship is actually a lifetime investment. Whereas the perspective of a typical church ministry sees discipleship as a “program”, which is: short- term,

¹⁷⁷ Following are some general thoughts gleaned from a particular “case study” – namely, our discipling relationship with our daughter-in-law. Actually, the content of this entire article is drawn from a lifetime of experience with discipling relationships with - one biological son, an adopted daughter, two adopted grandchildren we raised from birth - a grand-daughter (and her husband) and a grandson (and his wife, our daughter-in-law), two grandsons, a great-grand-daughter, and a great-grandson, as well as, many Christian couples, and countless individual Christians.

should see a “return on investment”, and attempts to identify the particular “techniques” which have good and measurable outcomes.

- The ministry of a discipling relationship includes:
 - time, talk & teaching
 - long-term friendship
 - long-term observation
 - imparting primarily through life example rather than merely dispensing information
- In a discipling relationship, affirmation and encouragement play a major role.
- Discipling is primarily about nurturing peoples’ lives rather than merely “equipping” people with spiritual commodities.
- Germane to discipleship is the concept of “Family”.¹⁷⁸ “Family” can be re-defined to include both biological and non-biological relationships.
- Discipling is more like parenting than simply teaching.

¹⁷⁸ Again, I would highly recommend an article by Chip Brogden entitled “*Family, Fellowship, and Leadership*”: <https://www.chipbrogden.com/family-fellowship-and-leadership/>

- What has been learned by the one being disciplined is sometimes acknowledged as coming from the one doing the discipling, but sometimes not.
- Generally speaking, young people are busy building their lives and don't realize they need a ministry relationship with spiritual elders until they are young adults, and maybe starting their own families.
- Those young people who do seek out a ministry relationship with spiritual elders are somewhat rare and wise.

“Apostolic Discipleship”¹⁷⁹

In my article, [Christ-centered Discipleship & Equipping Ministries](#)¹⁸⁰, I discuss at length the particular ministry relationships between a disciple and an apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher. Here, I would like to identify that which each of these Christ-appointed ministries have in common: “**Apostolicity**”.

“Apostolic”

“... He gave gifts to men.... And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ....”¹⁸¹

This passage tells us that Jesus gave certain gifts to men and gave certain men as gifts to the Church. Something which is important for us to understand is this: In building His Church,¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ What follows is material which dates back approximately 30 years and has been edited and restructured for this article.

¹⁸⁰ [Audio Version](#)

¹⁸¹ Ephesians 4:11-12 (ESV). Whereas the NASB reads "as apostles", etc. and the NKJV reads "to be apostles", etc., neither "as" nor "to be" are in the Greek text.)

¹⁸² Matthew 16:18

Jesus blesses men – not methods. There may be some value in considering discipling methodologies; but in the end, **Jesus blesses disciples through men rather than through methods.**

Again, Jesus gave certain gifts to men, and gave certain men as gifts to the Church. The apostle Paul was able to say to the Thessalonians, “**You know what kind of men we proved ourselves to be....**”¹⁸³ That which qualifies these men to equip the Church is not their fulfilling the presupposed “job descriptions” of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher, but rather **who they are as ambassadors of Christ**¹⁸⁴. These are men who **‘have been with Jesus’**¹⁸⁵, and bring the presence of Jesus.

Now, in saying these things, I AM NOT SAYING that every minister who *claims* to be an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor, or a teacher is inherently “apostolic”. I am far from even implying that. The point I endeavored to make in *The Condition of the Church* is that most ministers attempting to “equip the saints” are, in fact, NOT “apostolic”. What I AM SAYING is this: **Every minister who has been truly given to the Church as a gift**

¹⁸³ 1 Thessalonians 1:5 *The Amplified Bible*

¹⁸⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:20

¹⁸⁵ Acts 4:13

from the ascended Christ will prove to have this “apostolic” quality which I am discussing.¹⁸⁶

Just as there is an essential difference between the ministry of teaching and the ministry of discipling (specifically, “**teaching them to observe all Christ commanded**”), there is also an essential difference between ministry and “apostolic” ministry. And likewise, there is a difference between “Discipleship”, as conventionally understood, and “Apostolic Discipleship”.

Although there are various schools of thought on discipling, and different methodologies are promoted, I think it is true to say that discipleship is conventionally understood to be a ministry which focuses on the initial development of the basic components of the Christian life, such as Bible reading, prayer, local church attendance, obedience, stewardship, witnessing, etc. “Apostolic

¹⁸⁶ So that the reader doesn’t miss the point of what I desire to communicate here: The debate concerning whether the ministry of the apostle still exists for the Church today or “passed away” in the first century, in this case, is quite beside the point. *Apostolic* (adjective) teaching, based on the apostles’ (noun) teaching recorded in the Scriptures is an absolutely necessary and sorely lacking *genre and quality of teaching* having a particular approach and goal – viz. to lay the foundation of Christ and to build Christ experientially in the lives of individuals and churches. I am focusing here on the adjective, *apostolic*, rather than the noun, *apostle* – *specifically*, a *genre and quality* of faith and practice (Jude 3), rather than a *supposed* job description of an apostle. However, I do not hold to dispensationalism or cessationism – I do believe that all the equipping ministries in the New Testament are for today. I deal with this issue in the afore-mentioned article [Christ-centered Discipleship & Equipping Ministries](#) / [Audio Version](#)

Discipleship” certainly addresses these things, but while it is understood to be “**foundational**”, it is not looked on as being something “initial”, in fact, it is perceived as something “*eternal*”.

Christ-Centeredness

Discipleship has to do with the Christian life. But whereas conventional discipleship focuses on merely developing various practices of the Christian life, first and foremost, “Apostolic Discipleship” focuses on knowing Christ, who IS our life¹⁸⁷.

“Apostolic Discipleship” has a very definite Christ-centered approach, focusing on Christ as the Center of Christianity, Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life for the disciple, as well as Christ as the Foundation and Head of the Church.

“Apostolic Discipleship” is all about growing in Revelation of Christ, Relationship with Christ, and Reflection of Christ. This essential characteristic – which I am referring to as “apostolic” - is either seen and grasped or it isn’t. It is either the core of the discipleship or it is essentially missing.

¹⁸⁷ Colossians 3:4

Apostolic Fellowship

Acts 2:42 tells us that the disciples “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship....” In his commentary on this verse, John Gill, reminds us that the disciples were also **fellowshipping with the apostles**. The syntax in the Greek text has both the teaching *and* the fellowship referring back to “the apostles”. In fact, The Amplified Bible translates it as: “**the instruction and fellowship of the apostles**”.

What is the significance of the fact that the disciples “were continually devoting themselves to **the apostles’ fellowship**”? What was the nature of this “fellowship”? What was taking place during this “fellowship”? **Discipling**¹⁸⁸. A significant aspect of “Apostolic Discipleship” is that the relationship between the disciple and the one discipling is a MINISTRY RELATIONSHIP. These may also be friendships, but they are ministry relationships by nature. Something in addition to human friendship is taking place in these relationships. *The life of Christ is being ministered through the Spirit and the word of Christ*. In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying: “**It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh**

¹⁸⁸ Alternative terms may be: “Mentoring” and/or “Spiritual Parenting”.

profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”¹⁸⁹ Human friendships are good, but an intentional ministry relationship is vital for discipleship. Since it takes the authority of Christ to make a disciple of Christ, authentic ministry relationships share the life of Christ, specifically, they are Christ-centered relationships through which Christ is revealed and relationship with Christ is nurtured.

Apostolic Teaching

Acts 2:42 tells us that the disciples “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching....”

“Apostolic Discipleship” has to do with “**apostolic teaching**”. In my eBook, [The Apostles’ Teaching](#), I discuss at length teaching which is “apostolic” in nature; but I will attempt to summarize here by saying: *Apostolic teaching is teaching with a particular approach, goal, genre, and quality:*

The New Testament Scriptures explicitly tell us that the foundation of Christ is laid by *apostolic teaching*.¹⁹⁰ What does

¹⁸⁹ John 6:63

¹⁹⁰ I Corinthians 3:10-11, Ephesians 2:20, 3:1-7

this mean? How does *apostolic teaching* lay the foundation of Christ?

The goal of *apostolic teaching* is the EXPERIENCE of Christ and the FORMATION of Christ in the disciple. Therefore, the subject matter of *apostolic teaching* is Christ – that is, teachings ABOUT Christ and the teachings OF Christ. Teachings ABOUT Christ are found in typology throughout the Old Testament¹⁹¹, which are wonderfully encapsulated in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews.¹⁹² And, of course, the teachings OF Christ are found throughout the gospels, many of which are found in the "Sermon on the Mount" and the "Parables of the Kingdom".¹⁹³

Again, *apostolic teaching* is teaching with a particular approach, goal, genre, and quality – its goal is the EXPERIENCE of Christ and the FORMATION of Christ in the disciple. It is obvious that

¹⁹¹ E.G. The Old Testament tabernacle, feasts, and priesthood. I am of the opinion that the interpretation of ALL Old Testament typology is for the SOLE purpose of revealing Christ. The ONLY purpose of any of my teachings interpreting or incorporating Old Testament typology is to reveal Christ.

¹⁹² See my articles: *Seeing Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews*, *Seeing Him Who Is Unseen*, *Seeing Christ in the Tabernacle*, and *The Foundation of the Church*. For complimentary .pdf copies, email: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

¹⁹³ See my articles: *The Character of the King & His Kingdom*, *Abide in the Vine, Who Is this King of Glory*, *The Way of the Cross*, and *Seeing the Kingdom Through the Cross*. For complimentary .pdf copies, email: AtChristsTable@gmail.com

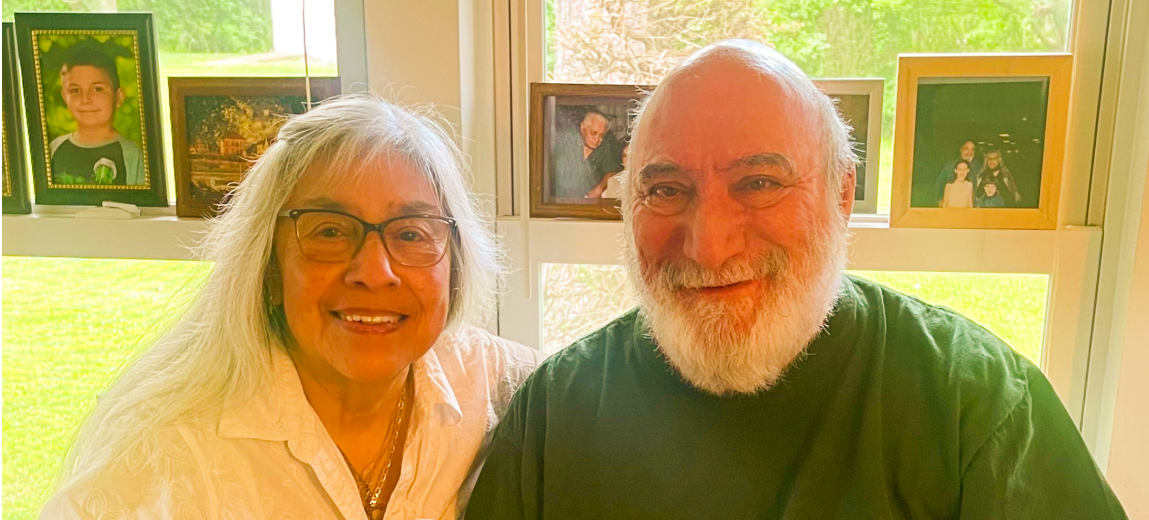
the Church has a plethora of teaching ministries. Personally, I think it is just as obvious that it has a dearth of *apostolic teaching* ministries. In order to obey the Lord's commission to "disciple all peoples", the Church needs to "continue steadfastly" and "be devoted to" *apostolic teaching*.¹⁹⁴

When the ascended Christ gives an equipping ministry gift, He also gives the necessary grace to fulfill that ministry. The *apostolic teaching* ministry is the special grace to teach the REVELATION of the mystery of Christ in such a way as to bring a people into fullness of RELATIONSHIP with Christ, with a view to REFLECTION of Christ – by the working of the Spirit.

"And we all, with unveiled face, *continually* seeing as in a mirror the glory of the Lord (in the face of Jesus Christ – Cf. 4:6), are *progressively* being transformed into His image from [one degree of] glory to [even more] glory, which comes from the Lord, [who is] the Spirit." 2 Corinthians 3:18 AMP

¹⁹⁴ Acts 2:42

Bill & Frances Furioso
~ At Christ's Table ~



Bill Furioso and his wife, Frances, have been married for more than 40 years, and have two children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Bill and Frances served as missionaries in South Africa for thirteen years making disciples, establishing churches, and training church leaders. Over a span of 40 years, they also traveled extensively in an itinerant Bible teaching ministry which took them to hundreds of gatherings on four continents ministering in churches, conferences, spiritual formation seminars, and home gatherings. They have shepherded several churches, discipled many to Christ, and mentored church leaders in the USA and abroad.

Being an avid student by nature, Bill has done both formal and informal study in various fields including Education, Music, Philosophy and Theology. As a writer, he has authored many publications which are distributed worldwide. Because of Bill's disabilities resulting from a spinal cord injury, he can no longer travel, so their ministries of writing, recording, distributing, mentoring, and correspondence are now shared primarily via the Internet... www.AtChristsTable.org

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