



CHAPTER 11

The Church

Do you enjoy microwave popcorn, particularly while watching a good movie or football game? What always amazes me about popcorn is the complete transformation that occurs of once hard, coarse seeds into soft, warm popcorn. This metamorphosis occurs because the microwave heats the moisture inside every seed until it turns to steam. Once it becomes steam, the pressure becomes so great that the shell can no longer contain the moisture and an explosion occurs. What was once inedible and indigestible is now tasty, edible, and delicious.

The point is that environment is everything. When the microwave performs as it was intended to, the seeds of corn are transformed.

What a microwave is to popcorn, the local church is to the Christian and his or her growth as a kingdom disciple. The local church is the context and environment God has created to transform Christians into what we were created and redeemed to be: fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. The church also is His authorized vehicle to manifest His kingdom rule and

authority in the world (Matt. 16:18–19; Eph. 1:22–23; 3:10). Churches that do not prioritize discipleship have missed their calling, and parachurch organizations that do not plug into the local church are out of alignment since it is the church that is the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:14–15).

Since all true believers possess the Holy Spirit, we already have the internal “moisture” necessary for the transformation process to occur. Therefore, if the transformation does not happen, we know that either the seeds are not in the proper environment, positioning themselves for transformation, or the microwave of the church is not functioning properly, producing spiritual heat and growth in order to make a difference. A kingdom church is a group of believers who covenant together to disciple its members in order to model and transfer heaven’s values in history. Like a foreign embassy that officially represents the homeland, the church is to serve as God’s embassy on earth that represents heaven. Yet the absence of kingdom disciples today is evident by the divide within our churches. In many, commitment to racial identity, class division, and political affiliation takes precedence over commitment to the kingdom.

I believe that the church’s failure to produce disciples has led to the rise of contemporary, secularized pop psychology with a Christian veneer. It has also led to a level of syncretism like little we’ve seen before. Syncretism is the combining of elements of true Christianity with those of false religions, thus diluting and polluting the Christian faith. However, the reality of such a mixed-up and deceiving religion certainly does not exonerate individual believers from their personal responsibility to follow Christ down the road to kingdom discipleship. It does, however, recognize that in addition to personal responsibility,

church leaders must understand the role of the church as God’s central institution in history for this process to occur. God addresses the church house before He addresses the White House (1 Peter 4:17).

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH THE CHURCH

Just as microwaves that don’t work are of little use to the seeds of corn, so churches that don’t disciple their believers fail to leave a kingdom impact on the culture around them. The church is God’s officially designated university of discipleship. It has been authorized to prepare His followers to represent Him and His kingdom perspective to the culture.

It is my contention that the road to discipleship is not nearly as complex as we make it. I believe the church that supplies the four vital experiences that God expects each Christian to pursue will assist each believer in becoming an authentic follower of Christ. Those four vital experiences are the church’s witness, teaching the Scriptures, fellowship with one another, and worship of God. We will explore each in the next section.

Discipleship is a process of the local church that seeks to bring believers from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they are then able to repeat that process with someone else. God’s goal is for you to become a visible, verbal follower of Christ and then replicate that in someone else’s life. The purpose of every local body of believers is to become a kingdom church making kingdom disciples who are having a kingdom impact individually and corporately in the world.

I believe so completely in this goal of the local church that when we founded our church back in 1976, I drafted our mission statement to read: *Discipling the Church to Impact the*

World. If and when the church is not producing disciples, it has failed—and actually operates in disobedience to the Great Commission's command to make disciples. Similarly, if General Motors is not producing cars, it has failed no matter how good the building or factory looks. This is because what you produce determines your legitimacy.

God's goal is that people be disciplined through His church, and the only proof that people are being disciplined is that they are changing. If they are not changing and maturing in their spiritual life, that means the discipleship process is not occurring or people are not submitting to it. It is obvious to us when a physical child is growing because he or she is changing. They change in their height, their weight, and in their abilities to care for themselves. Development is taking place as the child grows into an adult. In our spiritual lives, that development is called discipleship.

In our churches today we can get so caught up in programs and structure that we lose sight of the priority of discipleship. Yet all the programs in the world don't matter if they are not having as their result an increase in the area of discipleship. A church can have structure, large buildings, and a multitude of programs, but if the Holy Spirit is not free to lead people in an ongoing process of discipleship, that church itself is actually getting in the way of God's kingdom goals for His body of believers. Such inaction limits the work of the Holy Spirit in transferring kingdom power and authority to God's people, one of the Spirit's chief responsibilities (Acts 1:8). The result is weak, defeated Christians and churches that have little impact on the people around them.

In Acts 2 we meet one of the most dynamic and influen-

tial churches of all. This church is vibrant and alive. They own no buildings and have no loudspeakers. They have only the Old Testament, because the New Testament has not been written yet. Of course there are no bookstores or any full-time children's ministries, singles ministries, or couples ministries. Yet this church is on fire.

This is due to the Holy Spirit Himself. Looking back at the dynamic early church we learn a key reason that the church in Acts was so dynamic: it got off to a great start. Jesus had told the disciples in Acts 1:8, "Don't have church until the Holy Spirit shows up" (my paraphrase). They obeyed Him, and the Spirit showed up in great power at Pentecost.

Acts 2 reveals that this church was wildly influential when it came to living out the reality of being Jesus' disciples. It did this through four vital, Spirit-inspired experiences that are necessities for those who would follow Christ in kingdom discipleship. These experiences include the church's witness through its people (outreach), teaching the Word, fellowship, and worship—and not in any particular order. These are meant to operate simultaneously in our lives as we grow and develop.

THE CHURCH DISCIPLES THROUGH WITNESS AND TESTIMONY

When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost to give birth to the church in Acts 2, a number of things happened. One thing was that the church, led by Peter, stood up in a dynamic, bold witness for Christ. The most obvious event of the church's witness in Acts 2 was Peter's great Pentecost sermon. This is the same Peter who, just a short time earlier, was too scared to admit he knew Jesus when Jesus was being condemned before the high priest.

Now, suddenly, scared Peter becomes fearless Peter. What is the difference? The Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit has taken control of Peter, and Peter is about to take off and soar in his spiritual life. Now he will become a faithful witness for Jesus Christ along with the other disciples.

If you're going to grow as a kingdom disciple you must ask the Spirit to help you open your mouth and be a witness. You say, "But I'm not bold. I'm inhibited. I'm a private person." Well, the fact is that most of us are only private when we want to be. I've met a lot of "private" people who become very public and vociferous when their favorite team takes the field or the court. In other words, when something exciting enough happens in your life, you will talk about it without a whole lot of prompting.

One reason a lot of us Christians don't tell others about Christ is that we've lost our excitement about Christ. When He is exciting to you, you can't keep Him to yourself. When something dynamic occurs internally, you want to express it externally. If you are a reserved person, if discussing Christ with others is difficult for you, take a look at Acts 4. After the Jewish authorities had ordered the apostles to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus—and they backed the order with threats (vv. 18–21)—the apostles went straight to the church and explained the situation. The church immediately went to prayer, reminding God of His power and the fact that all this was happening in His predetermined plan (vv. 23–28).

Then notice the church's prayer request in verse 29: "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence." That's a prayer you can pray too. Ask God to give you the boldness not to be intimidated by this Christ-rejecting world, because there

are people all around you needing to hear the saving news of Jesus Christ.

If you're going to follow Christ as His disciple, you must be a witness. Whether it is in your actions or your words, you must represent the Lord in all you do. The believers who were in the upper room and who received the Spirit on Pentecost became witnesses. The result of their witness and Peter's sermon on that special day was the addition of three thousand new believers to the body of Christ. Now that's a witness! And please notice that these three thousand people did not come because of an evangelistic program. They came because God's people were overwhelmed by the experience of the presence of His Spirit. They were excited about Jesus.

Their excitement erupted in a great outreach, and many people were saved. Their witness also went beyond their words. "And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles" (Acts 2:43). There was not only a message to be heard, but there was also the power of God to be seen. You and I can, and should, also display the power of God. A true kingdom disciple will have the power of God working in his or her life. Abiding in Christ commands nothing less.

Let me ask you, who is the last person you shared Jesus Christ with? If you can't remember, you need to consider whether you're growing as a disciple the way you should. One mark of a person who wants to follow Christ, one absolute necessity for being His disciple, is to be His witness and testimony in all that you do.

Now witnessing doesn't just mean telling everyone you meet about Jesus (although there is nothing wrong with that, per se). It should always mean allowing others to witness the

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power of God in your life, the peace of Christ in your heart, and more. They may even ask what it is you have that enables you to live that way, which then opens the door for your witness of His name. But the truth is, when you are on fire about something, you don't need someone to goad you to tell them what it is. You don't need a program or ministry to get you to do anything about it. When a man is excited about a woman, he doesn't need a program to pick up the telephone, or to stay on that telephone when there is nothing left to say. He doesn't need a reminder to text her or show others a picture of her. He does all of this because his love for her is so authentic and deep.

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Yet many church members

have lost their fire. That's why we need an evangelistic or outreach program in so many churches today. Without that fire, we have to pull, motivate, and inspire people to mention Jesus when they should be mentioning Jesus just because He is Jesus!

The church is to be God's fireplace, igniting its members toward kingdom discipleship.

The key question each church must answer is not "How many members do we have?" It's "How many disciples are we producing?" Membership should serve as the introduction to fervent discipleship.

Along with their dynamic witness, the early believers were growing in their knowledge of God's Word. They were continually exposing themselves to the information and application of God's Word. In Acts 2:42 we read, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching." How often were they doing this? This passage says it was "day by day" (v. 46), just as people were being saved day by day. Do you notice the correlation? People were being saved every day. The followers were devoting themselves to the teaching of the Word every day. One impacted the other.

To live as a kingdom disciple, the Word of God must be as necessary and desirable for the spirit as food is for the body. In fact, when it comes to spiritual food, some of us are losing weight rapidly. Some of us are losing weight we can't afford to lose. Some of us have become emaciated. Why? Because we are receiving little or no nourishment.

The Word of God is designed to nourish the believer. The church must emphasize that it is the Scripture that equips us to live the Christian life. Your mind is key to becoming a disciple, because you are what you think (Prov. 23:7). If you have a messed-up mind, you're going to have a messed-up life. The body reflects the thought processes of the mind, and many of us have come into the Christian life with

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warped minds, contaminated by an ungodly system. We have minds that need to be renewed (Rom. 12:2). Only then will our lives be transformed.

If you want to fix what you do, you must first fix how you think about what you do. A transformed mind comes through the study and practice of Scripture.

Many of us have habits in our lives that we want to get rid of. But we say, "I can't," because we've been influenced by the enemy to say that. We've been brainwashed by the enemy to believe we will never have victory in that area. But God's Word can change that, if we will feed on it regularly the way we feed our bodies. The believers in Acts 2 devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, or doctrine. This was firsthand Scripture. The New Testament had not been written yet. So the apostles' doctrine was the authoritative Word of God.

If you are going to become a kingdom disciple, you must have a dynamic experience with the Word of God. God must begin to erase the old tapes in your mind, your old ways of thinking. One way to erase an old tape is to record new material over the old. The data God wants recorded in your heart and mind is His Word. That's why memorizing portions of the Bible is such a powerful teaching tool. Those verses are stored in your memory bank.

You cannot grow beyond what you know. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32 NIV). You must know it for it to set you free. The purpose of discipleship is to gain God's perspective on every matter of life. It doesn't make a difference what the opinion of your church, pastor, or family member is. What makes a difference is the truth. It is the job of the church to give the divine perspective on each aspect of life.

The Holy Spirit is often referred to as the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). This is because He only operates within the parameters of truth. So if truth is not being communicated by pastors and spiritual leaders throughout our land, then the flow of the Spirit is missing. The reason the church in Jerusalem was so alive with the Spirit was because they were committed to the truth.

What would you say to a doctor who was going to perform surgery on you and he started out by saying, "Well, I think this is the place I ought to cut"? Or what would you say to a pharmacist who got your medicine and told you, "I think this might be the one"? Or what about a pilot who mentioned this "might" be the button to push?

You probably wouldn't use that doctor, go to that pharmacy, or fly on that plane. The reason? Because you are committed to the truth and you want someone in those roles who is also committed to it—and knows it.

Similarly, when it comes to your spiritual life, you don't want guesswork or to be an object of trial and error or exploratory preaching and teaching. You need to place yourself under discipleship and mentors who know and practice the truth. The entire job of the apostles in the time of the church in Acts was teaching God's Word and praying. They devoted their lives to it. These days, far too many of our spiritual leaders spend far too much of their time building buildings, organizing programs, and all manner of things that take them from the study and proclamation of God's Word.

Each of us (not only those tasked with the high calling of teaching God's Word) needs to commit our time and energy to the study of God's Word through the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit's job is to reveal understanding and application of God's Word to you. Jesus said the Spirit would remind us of all that He taught (John 14:26). Paul gives us a powerful word about how to overcome the devil and his attempts to destroy our spiritual lives:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3-5)

Notice the words and phrases Paul uses here. Satan attempts to raise up speculations and other things "against the knowledge of God." What's the best defense against Satan's attempt to take your thinking processes captive? To "take every thought captive" for Christ. Imprison your thinking within the knowledge of God, which is found only in the Word of God!

This is crucial, because the moment you begin thinking the way the world thinks, like everybody else thinks, at that moment you begin thinking defeated thoughts. Many believers are being defeated because of the way they think. They have allowed Satan and the world, instead of Christ, to capture their thinking. If you are going to become a mature disciple of Jesus Christ, you must make a conscious effort to partake of His Word. You aren't going to get much if any help or encouragement from the culture.

Paul says the goal of taking our thoughts captive is that we might be obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-6). You need to know God's Word that you might live God's Word. You don't study and learn the Bible so you can pass tests. It is only in applying

the Word that it becomes a part of your experience. Just as a student driver can study a driver's handbook all day long and know the theory, he needs more than what's in the handbook; he won't really learn how to drive until he gets into the car with an instructor and takes off.

So, every time you and I open up the Word of God, our prayer should be, "Lord, show me what You want me to do"—not just, "Show me what You want me to know." Every Sunday you come to church, your prayer should be, "Lord, open up Your Word and speak to me so that I will know what decisions to make in my life." Prayer must be intimately connected to Bible study.

If you want to follow Christ, if you want the necessities of discipleship to become real in your life, you need a church to help you develop an insatiable hunger for God's Word. You must cultivate a love for the Word. If you don't have that love, that hunger, right now, don't fake it. Go to the Lord and pray sincerely, "Lord, give me an appetite for Your Word. Make it more precious and valuable to me than the food I eat to keep my body healthy." To acquire a taste for Bible study, you will have to discipline yourself to sit down and read, whether you feel like reading or not. The more time you spend in the Word, the more you will understand. And the more you understand, the more you will want to read.

You know you're becoming a kingdom disciple when day by day you're in the Word. You're not just waiting until Sunday so somebody else can feed you. You know you're maturing when you learn to feed yourself. When the Word of God is precious to you, you're on your way. Church should light the fire; you must fan the flame.

LIFE-CHANGING FELLOWSHIP

The third vital experience in following Christ is being devoted to fellowship (Acts 2:42). The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*. It means to "share something in common with others." It means being a part of a common family of sorts. Fellowship is the sharing of our lives with other believers. So biblical fellowship is not just coffee and donuts in Sunday school or a meal in the fellowship hall.

You'll never grow to full maturity in Jesus Christ all alone. There is no such thing as a Lone Ranger Christian, who is a growing, active disciple of Christ. It is not, "My Father in heaven"; we were instructed to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven."

You cannot become a disciple of Jesus Christ independently of others. That's why the church is so important. It is the "fireplace" where one log touches another and the fire is maintained. In fact, the church at Jerusalem did not only share their lives with one another. They shared their possessions too, meeting any needs that arose (Acts 2:44-45). That's part of fellowship too.

True discipleship can happen only by being an active participant in community with other believers (Eph. 4:16; 1 Cor. 12), which is why the author of Hebrews says that we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together with other believers. In doing so we can stimulate one another toward love and good deeds (see Heb. 10:24-25). An unchurched believer is a disobedient and selfish believer who is limiting their own development and experience of spiritual authority.

If you are becoming stagnant in your spiritual life, you need to be in proximity to others who are on fire so their fire can ignite you. If you are losing your spiritual fire and you're alone,

you're going to become ashes. So the question we must ask is, are we connected with other believers who desire to be on fire too? Fellowship is designed to keep the fire burning. There was no such thing as a non-churched Christian in the early church. They were in dynamic fellowship with each other. If and when you are a cul-de-sac Christian (where everything revolves around you) rather than a conduit Christian (where the love of God flows through you to others), you will never fully live as a kingdom disciple.

We need each other because the best of us can get spiritually dull. The best of us sometimes want to throw in the towel. The best of us sometimes fall flat on our faces. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12), because falling is right around the corner.

You and I must be in vital relationship with other saints who can hold us up. But unfortunately, many people have traded relationship for entertainment. See, when you're being entertained, you don't have to do anything. You just sit back and let someone else amuse you.

Relationships are hard. They take work. Entertainment is easy. All you need is a chair and a remote. That's why so many individuals and families are hiding out in front of the television, or on their smartphones or tablets—the great relationship killers.

I think these things are the greatest hindrance to building

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dynamic relationships. Whole families never talk to each other because everybody is in a different room watching a different thing. That's what happens within the church family, as well. Fellowship doesn't just happen. You have to plan fellowship, set aside time to cultivate friendships with other believers.

Here's something else about biblical fellowship. Fellowship isn't fellowship if Jesus Christ is not part of the conversation. If you invite me over to watch a football game and all we do is watch the game and eat, we did not have fellowship. Fellowship is always designed to spur one another on spiritually, build each other up in the faith, edify one another. True fellowship always has a spiritual goal: the mutual sharing of the life of Christ.

That doesn't mean there cannot be food involved. Acts 2:46 makes it clear there were a lot of fellowship meals in the early days of the church. We're going to have a great meal of celebration and fellowship in heaven (Rev. 19:9). But the point of it is not simply to get together and eat and call that fellowship. A meal just presents a natural context for fellowship. The question is what happens and what we talk about when we are together. We should leave a time of fellowship feeling strengthened and encouraged in the faith.

True biblical fellowship also includes visible accountability. That is why the church is called a body (1 Cor. 12:1–31; Eph. 4:11–16; Rom. 12:4–6). A body can only function properly when all parts are connected and mutually supporting and serving each other. The absence of accountability to the leaders and other members in the local church means true discipleship is not occurring.

As we have become more affluent and more independent, we've lost our need for one another. Fellowship in the Bible was

designed to show us that we need other believers. You can't make it on your own. Neither can I. God designed the church to be a place of fellowship—an environment where people connect with each other. If you come to church just to sit, soak, and sour in your pew, then you are not truly living as a kingdom disciple. When God told Abraham He would bless him, He told Abraham that He would also bless others through him. A blessing is not merely meant to stop at you. Being a kingdom disciple means you are willing to live in connection with others, learning from them and also teaching through example, sharing life on life so that each may be spurred on to good deeds in the Lord and spiritual maturity.

HONORING GOD THROUGH YOUR WORSHIP

Lastly, but of chief importance, a kingdom disciple worships God. Again in Acts 2:42, the believers devoted themselves to "the breaking of bread [celebrating the Lord's Supper] and to prayer." In verse 46 we read that they were going to the temple every day, and "praising God" continually (v. 47). In the process, selfishness began to fall by the wayside (Acts 2:44–45).

Worship is the furnace of the spiritual life and of a disciplining church. Worship is basically the recognition of God for who He is and what He has done and what we are trusting Him to do. God is the focus of worship. Therefore, the issue in worship is not necessarily what you get out of it. The most important thing is what God receives from it. Worship does not start with what God does for you today. It starts with what you do for Him.

Praising God, worshipping Him, and celebrating Him for who He is and what He does is the way to get God's attention. God responds to our worship. In fact, God invites us to worship

Him. He has taken the initiative. You will be surprised at the way the Spirit of God will ignite your Christian life when worship becomes not an event, but an experience; not a program, but a way of life. That includes both public and private worship, because both are crucial for growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

No matter what is wrong in your life, there is always a reason to worship, to praise God. Don't get me wrong—praising God doesn't mean denying your problem. If it's there, it's there. But what does Paul say? "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). If you want God's power in your life, then worship must be part of your daily operation; celebrating God, exulting in Him for who He is and what He has done.

So what happens when you become a witnessing, learning-the-Word, fellowshipping, and worshipping kind of Christian? If those four experiences are a part of your normal Christian life, I guarantee you will be progressing in your discipleship. Watch out for the believer who is ignoring one or more of those areas.

When a Christian doesn't show up for church on a regular basis, something is misfiring in his or her life. When he or she has no desire to be with other Christians, something is wrong. When that person neglects the Word and remains silent about Jesus Christ week after week, something is wrong. But when we submit to the Spirit of God that He might cultivate these things in us, we are going to see exciting things happen. In the early church believers had the four necessities going strong, and at least two things happened. They had spiritual power, and they saw spiritual results.

"Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe" (Acts 2:43). They

were amazed at the work of God that was going on in their midst. This doesn't mean all of them were miracle workers. The apostles were doing the miracles, but everybody was awed. Everybody had a sense that God was at work in a mighty way.

What were the results? Selfish attitudes decreased (Acts 2:44–45). They became concerned about one another. They began to share with one another. Then people were getting saved every day as a result of this church's dynamic ministry (v. 47).

And let me reiterate that none of this came about because of a program. These were the results, the overflow, of their experience with God. Things were happening so fast there wasn't time to develop programs. I'm not against programs. But programs can never replace the experience of the Spirit.

My burden and vision for each local church is that its people move more toward experiencing God than doing programs for God. The church is like a marriage. You can't just program a marriage and expect to find happiness. You and your spouse can go out every Friday at the same time, but without any dynamic interaction in the marriage you can program yourselves into boredom.

We can structure the church so tightly that even the Spirit of God can't break through and find a slot on the program. The Holy Spirit is the most underutilized power source in history. It is time we release Him through biblical discipleship to do His job of transferring Jesus' authority to His kingdom people. My desire for you is that you will not approach the four necessities of God's discipleship process as just a formula—mix this and that, throw in a pinch of the other, and out comes a mature kingdom disciple.

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Instead, I desire that the Spirit of God will enable you to make these things a living reality as you seek to follow Christ and become His disciple through the context of your local church.

Also, don't try to make someone else's experience or spiritual routine yours. God is not trying to make us all act alike. We have a common goal, to be fully committed kingdom disciples, but we don't all get there exactly the same way.