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Introduction

The Middle Ages spanned from 600 AD to 1500 AD, and a great deal of change happened throughout the world. Islam started and spread throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and up into Europe. Rome had fallen, and the feudal kingdoms arose throughout Europe. Several dynasties rose and fell in China, with the Mongols invading and eventually driven out. As these changes evolved, the trade between nations resulted in increased tensions as they sought out markets and resources. The friction caused by differing religions led to The Crusades and Caliphate Wars between Christian nations and the Islamic nations.

Christianity had gained a strong foothold in the Mediterranean region, North Africa, and most of Europe. The Church melded with the secular governments in Europe, and the clergy arrived in seats of power. In many cases, this had a corrupting effect upon the Church as men sought power by becoming priests rather than being motivated to serve God. Dempsey related how the clergy of the time went against Jesus' directives in Mark 10,¹ where Jesus told them not to behave as the Gentiles did and "lord" over the people.²

As all of these changes progressed, the people of God continued to worship Him and sought to disciple others, according to Jesus' commands and the apostles' encouragements. The Church was highly structured, operated authoritatively, and there was a distinction created between clergy and laity.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

² Rodney Dempsey, *Presentation: Discipleship in the Middle Ages*, (Liberty University, September 20, 2017), Accessed on July 19, 2020, from https://learn.liberty.edu/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_628058_1&content_id=_40817722_1.

This paper will reflect upon how the disciples pursued sanctification in the Middle Ages and what practices they utilized for discipleship. Also, the paper will consider how to use some of the medieval discipleship practices in modern days, as well as how they might be implemented at The Crossing Church. Finally, the paper will reflect upon ways that the clergy/laity division of duties might be resolved in current times.

Middle Ages Discipleship Practices to be Implemented Today

The believers of the Middle Ages in Europe were mostly unable to read. The Church had grown to be a pervasive force in their lives. Since they were unable to read, it was a common circumstance for them not to have a place for formal education in Scripture. Many of them learned from each other and focused on "right living." Van Engen stated, "So, for the medieval person, the central concern was on making faith manifest in love."³ This focus on doing the right thing can be viewed as helping entrench the ideas of works-based salvation. Since Christianity had become pervasive in society, Van Engen described that ". . . people tended to take faith for granted. They grew up with it. Everybody they knew was a Christian. So they concentrated on good works."⁴ The theology they were taught encouraged believers to demonstrate their love for God by living uprightly, as defined by the priests. They were likely to do questionable actions such as castigating their bodies, go on pilgrimages, and refraining from sexual relations as a demonstration of their intense love for God. Van Engen related, "People in the Middle Ages had a strong sense they were to love God not just with their minds but also with their bodies. By

³ "Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Christian History Interview - Stepping Into a Christian Culture," (*Issue 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*, ChristianityToday.com, 1996), Accessed on July 25, 2020 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-49/everyday-faith-in-middle-ages-christian-history-interview.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

disciplining the body and its passions, they believed they disciplined their souls, pleased God, and prepared themselves to receive grace."⁵

The medieval Church had grown to value having educated and trained clergy serving them. These individuals were able to communicate the meaning of God's Word more clearly to them, and their intellectual abilities were comforting and impressive to the ordinary believers. Van Engen said, "The medieval church was anxious to have an educated clergy who would, in turn, educate the laity."⁶

Some amazing ministers rose during the Middle Ages. One of these significant ministers was Saint Patrick. He was captured in Britain as a young man and forced into slavery in Ireland.⁷ After a few years, he escaped and returned to Britain. God placed a call upon his life, and Patrick became a priest. His heart was moved to minister to the people of Ireland, so he returned to that land. As he worked to serve the people of Ireland, he developed a group of people who operated with four principles.⁸ They did ministry as a team. They believed in a holistic faith and lived and worked in a missional community. They also embraced the idea of biblical hospitality.

Analysis of How to Implement Middle Ages Practices at The Crossing Church

The medieval churches had the challenge of engaging with the people in their region and encouraging them to live a holy life that was focused on service to God as well as their

⁵ "Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Christian History Interview - Stepping Into a Christian Culture," Accessed on July 25, 2020 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-49/everyday-faith-in-middle-ages-christian-history-interview.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Winfield Bevins, "4 Lessons from St. Patrick for Making Disciples the Irish Way." *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, September 14, 2015. Accessed July 25, 2020, from <https://gcdiscipleship.com/article-feed/2015/09/14/4-lessons-from-st-patrick-for-making-disciples-the-irish-way?rq=4/>.

⁸ Ibid.

neighbors. The Celtic missionaries learned to operate as a team rather than attempting to reach villages by themselves. This team approach enabled them to be very useful as they evangelized Ireland.

Similarly, The Crossing Church seeks to build small groups where the members become a team who work to reach their friends. Members are encouraged to host events to introduce their non-member friends to the members of the groups and assist each other with building relationships with these non-members.

The Celtic missionaries operated with a "holistic" faith that enabled them to face the hardships of ministry but supporting each other while validating God's involvement in their ministry by actively engaging in ministry to others.⁹ By serving others, they saw God's power at work, which built their faith. Our small group leaders are taught to enlist their members to work with them in ministry. They are encouraged to seek the Lord together and to be supportive in prayer and presence as they work to serve others.

This close-knit group of believers in Ireland experienced biblical community as well as experiencing what it meant to be united in thought and effort. This community allowed them to operate as a missional community. At The Crossing Church, our goal for the small groups that they would bond together as they share their concerns and pray for each other's needs and ministry opportunities. By becoming adept at working and praying for each other, we expect our people to become more effective in ministry as they operate as a missional community.

The Celtic Church learned how to demonstrate their love for others believably. Their efforts saw the druids in Ireland get chased away, and large numbers of individuals asked Jesus

⁹ Winfield Bevins, "4 Lessons from St. Patrick for Making Disciples the Irish Way."

to become their Lord.¹⁰ Their graciousness and hospitality proved to be attractive to their communities, and many responded as they saw that these people sought to serve and bless them. The Crossing Church can adopt the same thought process. Rather than bringing judgement to those they do not know the Lord, the members can seek to build relationships with lost individuals and look for opportunities to explain who Jesus is and what His character is to these people. As they prove their love and concern for others, these people will become willing to listen to what they say and trust their words.

Overcoming the Clergy/Laity Divide in the Modern Church

Stetzer's premise is that the current church model that is broadly used in the American Church emphasizes the importance of the paid clergy and devalues the role of the laity.¹¹ In the years that this practice has been followed, the laity has increasingly become less involved in sharing their faith, and the overall vitality of churches has decreased. Pastors in many churches sought to perform as much of the ministry activities as possible. This centralization of effort could be motivated by good intentions or by a fear that if someone else did this work, then the value of the pastor to the congregation could diminish. Similarly, many pastors are very reluctant to allow anyone else to preach from their platforms. Instead of raising people whom God has gifted with a teaching gift, the clergy restricted access and kept the focus upon themselves.

Stetzer encourages the thought that all believers are priests in God's service and that the term laity should be discontinued. Simply discontinuing using a term would not solve this

¹⁰ Winfield Bevins, "4 Lessons from St. Patrick for Making Disciples the Irish Way."

¹¹ Ed Stetzer, "Laypeople and the Mission of God, part 1 – Killing the Clergy-Laity Caste System," Christianity Today, July 17, 2012, Accessed July 25, 2020 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/july/laypeople-and-mission-of-god-part-1--killing-clergy.html>.

problem, but actively promoting the importance of each believer's contribution could be supported by changing the nomenclature used to describe church members.

If pastors were to embrace this idea, we would continually speak of the challenge each person has as a priest in God's court. Our pastors would remind people of our role in serving them, equipping them, and encouraging them toward the ministry that God has prepared for them to accomplish. This concept is consistent with Stetzer's encouragement to include affirmation and assessment when making the culture change needed to move the non-staff priests to the forefront of ministry.¹²

The Church should be run with good order, and the leadership positions that the staff pastors hold are essential for coordination and spiritual direction. The fundamental concept that the church should convey is that the church leaders are to encourage the believers to do ministry and to feel empowered by the paid staff to do so, rather than withholding ministry access from them.

Conclusion

The medieval churches operated in a time of significant change and had certain limitations that they had to work to overcome. The people valued the knowledge the priests had and wanted to learn from trained clergy. These trained clergy aggregated power over time, which became an impediment to the people of the Church. The people sought to prove their worthiness to God through actions they performed, rather than understanding that God loved them and that His grace was what provided salvation. The priests took advantage of this fear the

¹² Ed Stetzer, "Laypeople and the Mission of God, part VI – Two Final Essentials: Affirmation and Assessment," Christianity Today, November 26, 2012, Accessed July 25, 2020 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/november/laypeople-and-mission-of-god-part-vi--two-final.html>.

people held and figured out ways to profit from their desire for the forgiveness of sins by selling indulgences.

God raised people who studied His Word and acted upon the principles He provided. Men like Saint Patrick raised others to become active ministers who shared the gospel and served others by telling the truth and demonstrating God's love. Their faithfulness to love others also confirmed their sincere love from God.

The Crossing Church can learn from these medieval leaders and encourage the development of their people to be able to serve God well. The church leaders need to empower the members to actively engage with others to share the gospel and to help new believers become disciples by teaching them the Word and allowing them to serve others in practical ways.

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