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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Apostle Paul’s Understanding of the Importance and Order of Family	3
Difference between Discipleship in the Gospels and the Epistles.....	4
Spiritual Family as the Focal Point of Disciple Making.....	7
Crossing Church’s Method of Making Disciples within the Spiritual Family	9
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	11

Introduction

The early church was amazing in the ability of the believers to spread the gospel throughout the known world. These believers came from all walks of life. Proportionally, they were people of modest means and limited economic and social power. Their actions changed the known world and overcame the existing religions with the gospel of truth.

This paper will review the Apostle Paul's understanding of the family of believers and how he described to believers the ways they should operate as if they were siblings. An analysis of differences in discipleship can be seen in how the original eleven apostles learned from Jesus and how the early church engaged in discipleship. Finally, the analysis will consider the role of the spiritual family in discipleship as well as describe how The Crossing Church makes disciples using the spiritual family dynamic.

Apostle Paul's Understanding of the Importance and Order of Family

Hellerman explains that the Apostle Paul's teaching on the concepts of "spiritual family" can be grouped into four categories: affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family loyalty.¹

Affective solidarity is described as the societal norm that is taught to people regarding how important certain relationships should be in their lives. In the Mediterranean region, children of the same father were expected to be emotionally devoted to each other. Paul used the sibling language of "brothers and sisters" to communicate an expectation of natural devotion between siblings in God's spiritual family. Family unity describes how siblings should interact with each other. There should be harmony and love between siblings, and Paul referenced this

¹ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), Kindle Edition, p. 105.

expectation in Eph 4.² Material solidary is explained as the willingness to provide resources to each other generously and supportively. Finally, family loyalty was promoted by Paul as he encouraged believers to shift their traditional loyalties to their spiritual family and be committed to this new family in all matters. These new believers changed the known world because of the way they acted. Hellerman points out, “People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved.”³

The early church spread quickly because they embraced the teachings of the Apostle Paul and took to heart their need to operate as “family” with each other. Hellerman shared, “The movement attracted people because of the Christians’ behavior toward one another and toward those outside the church. Yes, Christian beliefs were appealing. But for Julian and his pagan peers, the way in which Christians treated one another and their pagan neighbors was the more persuasive explanation for the growth of the early church.”⁴

Difference between Discipleship in the Gospels and the Epistles

Deffinbaugh pointed out that the King James Version of the Bible misinterpreted the wording in the Great Commission, and thus for centuries, people placed an inordinate priority on “go” to the nations rather than a more appropriate phrasing which would have been “as you go.” This simple change in understanding shifts the challenge from being a highly evangelistic purpose to a challenge to make disciples as we go along in our daily lives. Deffinbaugh says,

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

³ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), Kindle Edition, p. 105.

⁴ Ibid., 106.

“The outcome has been unfortunate, for we have placed more emphasis upon going than was grammatically intended. Then, too, we have not given the full force to the command to ‘make disciples.’”⁵ This idea shifts a believer’s understanding away from thinking it is best to move far away from the place where they have developed relationships with others to “reach” a remote group with the gospel. The act of moving away is noble, but it should only be pursued when one has received a directive from the Lord to do so.

Deffinbaugh points out that the apostles did not act in a manner that would align with the King James version of disciple-making. Deffinbaugh asserts, “The very ones who received the command to go forth with the gospel stayed home in Jerusalem.”⁶ It is essential, however, to recognize that God has clearly used the men and women who enthusiastically pursued the “going” form of evangelism. The gospel has been spread around the world into regions that were very difficult to reach because of their commitment.

Unfortunately, the process of discipleship appears to have been spread less enthusiastically, and churches around the world have been closing as their remaining members dwindle due to their failure to replicate themselves. The apostles who were given specific training from Jesus remained in Jerusalem and worked to coordinate and expand the sharing of the gospel from there. They did not choose to do what would have been safest for themselves, as the environment was very hostile toward Christians in Jerusalem. They worked to explain what they had experienced with Jesus and how God’s Word applied to the early Christians in a time of turmoil and change.

⁵ Bob Deffinbaugh, “What Happened to Discipleship in the Epistles?”, (*Bible.org*, June 2, 2004), Accessed May 20, 2020 from <https://bible.org/seriespage/18-what-happened-discipleship-epistles>.

⁶ Ibid.

When one considers the explosive expansion of the early church, it is reasonable to believe that those early believers were extremely competent in making disciples like themselves. The apostles were taught by Jesus what it meant to turn from their prior lives and to give their lives in service to Him. His inclusion of this group of men during three years of impactful ministry was key to their development as apostles, and while there is much to learn from their time with Him, it isn't a model that all disciples can follow as they attempt to make disciples. Richards comments that "Despite the insights that we may gain from studying the teaching methods utilized by Jesus, and despite the value of some of the processes that may be derived from such a study, the truth is that Jesus' discipling method is not directly applicable to Christian nurture in the church."⁷ With regard to the apostles, much of what they learned, they only appeared to apply after the Day of Pentecost when Holy Spirit indwelt them. Prior to that event, they were fearful and uncertain, often misapplying what they had learned even though they had witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection. Simply put, they became empowered once the Spirit came upon them. In a similar way, the believers we study in the Epistles seemed to be actively wrestling with their journey of sanctification, and they embraced what Paul, Timothy, Apollos, and others shared with them and taught it to those they knew. These believers met in small gatherings and reasoned with each other as they discussed what they knew of Scripture, as well as the writings of the apostles. The Holy Spirit was active in their lives, which indicates that they were actively pursuing the development of their personal relationships with God.

⁷ Lawrence O. Richards, "The Disappearing Disciple: Why Is the Use of 'Disciple' Limited to the Gospels and Acts?", (Evangelical Journal, 11 March 1992), 5.

Spiritual Family as the Focal Point of Disciple Making

The closeness that should exist in the spiritual family provides a fertile ground for believers to serve each other as members of the body of Christ, as well as for training up those who are new to the spiritual family. Those mature believers in the local church can teach those who are younger in the faith as well as demonstrate how to live out a life of holiness practically. These mature folks can help explain how they “think” about Scripture and answer common questions that arise as a person moves away from secular thinking to a more “Christ-like” mindset.⁸

The gifts of the Spirit are meant to be used in service to the body of Christ, and also enable believers to be effective in serving others according to Christ’s purpose. Each believer is given specific gifts that are given purposefully. The believer is to consider those gifts and how to apply them most effectively. This challenges the believer to remain focused on serving Christ with those gifts, rather than merely using them to advance the believer’s self-interest. The instruction provided in Phil 2:3-4 reminds the believer, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” The ability to see their fellow believers as a spiritual family provides the motivation to serve others selflessly.⁹

As a believer embraces their relationship with Jesus daily through prayer and meditation, the life-giving relationship that is developed can be expected to “pour out” of the believer as they describe what they are learning and experiencing in that relationship. Jesus gave the Great Commission to the Church in Matt 28:19-20, and it should be easy for believers to share their

⁸ “Body of Christ”, (AllAboutGod.com, 2002), Access on July 18, 2020 from <https://www.allaboutgod.com/body-of-christ.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

faith with those that they encounter. It should be a natural expression of their lives to describe the One whom they dearly love and explain to others how He has impacted their lives. It makes no sense that a believer would be ashamed to describe this relationship with others.¹⁰

Believers have engaged in the practice of gathering together to encourage each other and celebrate what God is doing in their midst. They also focus on showing reverence and declaring their love for God as they gather. This practice is encouraged in Scripture such as Psalm 92:1-2, which says

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the arp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Certain believers are blessed with talents to sing beautifully and to play instruments in amazing ways. These talents are God-given and are to be used to aid other believers in their worship of God. This greatly enhances the gathering of the “body of Christ” in worship. In addition, the acts of service to God’s purposes and in service to others is a demonstration of worship of God. The action gives evidence of the heart change that a believer experiences and then demonstrates by showing love for God and others through action. James 2:14-17 affirms this thought when it says,

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

All these behaviors that have been described need to be taught to a new believer to aid them in their development as a disciple.

¹⁰ “Body of Christ”, (AllAboutGod.com, 2002).

Crossing Church's Method of Making Disciples within the Spiritual Family

At The Crossing Church, the church leadership has adopted a slogan of “Welcome Home” that is used on billboard marketing as well as internet-based messaging. In addition, the church has used the slogan “We Are Crossing” to enhance group identity and to convey the idea that the people of God are moving forward into the promise that God has given to bless His people, provide for them, and to include them into His family (Josh 3). These slogans align well with the idea that the people of God are an inclusive spiritual family.

Those who express a desire to surrender their lives to Jesus' lordship are counseled individually and encouraged to begin a discipleship process. They are invited to a small group, where they will begin to develop relationships with others in the church. These groups focus on supporting each other with prayer and fellowship. In addition, the group leaders help their members to join in ministry projects that the church organizes each quarter. These events help the group members use their spiritual gifts in ministry to others, and are designed to allow these members to see places they can be plug-in to serve the community outside the church.

These “young in the faith” believers are invited to go through a series of studies with mature believers that expose them to biblical principles that God's Word provides to give disciples direction on how to live their lives. These studies take about two years to complete if a person engages in the entire series with no time gaps.

As believers participate in weekly worship services, they are encouraged to get involved in ministry within the church. The idea of “serving the body” is presented to and encouraged among the congregation, and the ministry areas are diligent in training and scheduling people to serve during the weekend services. Depending on the believers' gifting and talents, they might also serve in an administrative capacity during the week. Others who have a strong mercy

gifting are encouraged to serve with the pastoral care ministries to interact with those in hospitals, shut-ins, those in grief situations, and those in need of benevolence. Learning to minister to other believers is key to strengthening the concept of being a spiritual family.

As believers mature in their faith, they are invited to become leaders of those that are “younger in the faith” than they. Opportunities for training as small group and ministry leaders are provided along the way.

Conclusion

The concept of family that was common in the early church underlies what the Apostle Paul intended for believers as they engaged in discipling each other. The spiritual family was meant to be devoted to each other in an uncommon manner. This family was expected to adhere to the ideals of nobility, where individuals were willing to sacrifice for each other and were committed to investing in the newest members to foster their ability to live as a holy people who served God and served others. The emphasis was on relationships and service, and the church grew organically as others saw their love for each other and desired it as well. Evangelism occurs naturally and explosively when God’s people live as God desires for them to live. The Crossing Church is working to provide this relational family model in the small group gatherings the congregation has formed, as well as to raise up mature believers who can model holy living and service to others.

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