

BEING THE BODY



CHARLES COLSON
ELLEN VAUGHN



W PUBLISHING GROUP

www.publishinggroup.com

A Division of Thomas Nelson, Inc.
www.ThomasNelson.com

22

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS



Every member of the Body has the potential to be—and should be fed and led toward functioning as a fully equipped agent of Jesus Christ, as His minister.

—JACK HAYFORD

ASK ABOUT THE LOCAL CHURCH'S ROLE in the world, and most Christians immediately begin hauling out mission statements, action plans, and strategy schemes. They are already lacing up their Nikes, asking, "What should we do?"

Action plans and mission statements are great things. But first, like Dick Halverson, we need to see the church from a higher perspective. We need the big-picture view of the Body, alive and vibrant—the holy presence in the world. The church's role in the world is not a series of independent items on an action checklist. Instead, the church's role (what it does) is dependent on its character (what it is) as a community of believers.

What we do, therefore, flows from who we are.

Remember the bold believers in Eastern Europe who brought down their Communist rulers? They didn't hold congregational meetings and discuss their goals and objectives as part of a five-year plan ("Year One: Tear Down Berlin Wall"). Their strength derived not from their to-do list, but from who they were—the church. Their very presence as the people of God, loyal to a greater kingdom, invoked a power that even the most ruthless government could not repress.

The same was true of the early church. The first Christians worshiped God and lived as a holy community, conforming their character to the demands of Christ rather than Caesar. They didn't purpose to change history. They did so because of who they were.

This character-oriented perspective is foreign to our achievement-oriented society. Particularly in the U.S., we focus on what people do rather than who they are. We evaluate, classify, and prioritize with that all-important question: "So, what do you do?"

Our consumer-oriented religious culture tends to run the same way. Many Christians measure churches by their status in the community or by what they do: their outreach programs, musical repertoire, and fellowship opportunities. Seldom do you hear a person say, "I decided to join this church because of its character as a holy community." Nor do most believers choose a church for its capacity to disciple and equip them for ministry.

Yet these fundamentals of character should be our very first considerations. If the church is the Body, the holy presence of Christ in the world, its most fundamental task is to build communities of holy people who are just like Jesus. And the first priority of those communities is to disciple men and women to maturity in Him and then to equip them to live their faith in every aspect of life and in every part of the world.

MAKING DISCIPLES

The most familiar of our mandates is the Great Commission: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth," Jesus said. "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."¹

Note that this is not a charge to individuals. It is a commission to the church. Baptism, the public display of faith in Christ and the visible sign of entry into the church, can only be carried out by the church. And only the church can truly teach all that Christ has commanded, equipping believers to grow in maturity and to be the people of God.

And note also that "making disciples" involves more than evangelism.

Though the church must be passionate in its calling to introduce people to Jesus Christ, that is only a part of God's commission to us. Evangelism must be fully integrated with *discipleship* in order for the church to truly be obedient to Scripture.

Yet discipleship sometimes gets lost in the focus on evangelism. Ask evangelicals what the first priority of the church is, and most will invariably answer, "Evangelism." In their fund-raising letters, many ministries focus solely on evangelism, because supporters love to read about, and tend to give money to, the work of lost souls coming to Christ.

Sometimes an erroneous understanding of evangelism creates false guilt. I vividly remember hearing a visiting missionary use his entire message one Sunday morning to berate the congregation. "The only purpose of the church is soul-winning," he charged, pounding the pulpit and glaring at the people. "Each and every one of you are failing if you are not out there winning souls for Christ."

Of course evangelism is crucial! We'll discuss it at length in an upcoming chapter. But it is not the end of the story, as in so many testimonies we hear. In my life, Tom Phillips introduced me to Christ. I was born again. But I was an infant in the faith. Then a group of faithful brothers in Washington fed, taught, encouraged, and corrected me, even as my new membership in the church further sustained and equipped me.

Once a person receives Christ, his or her growth in holiness—sanctification—is a lifelong process. And it happens in the context of the local congregation.

BUILDING UP THE BODY

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul described this process when he sketched the anatomy of a healthy church:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the

BEING THE BODY

Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.²

Paul is speaking here of the whole body, the church universal. But since the process described can only take place in a local community of faith, theologian and writer T. M. Moore uses this passage as a model for the progression of vigorous development for the church particular. And *discipleship* is the key to that process.

Moore breaks down the major elements in Paul's description of how God builds up the church:

- Unity of the faith. The church must have a oneness of confessional creed (common understandings, vision, goals, and aspirations), as well as a oneness of experience (shared lives).
- The knowledge of the Son of God. The church must have full assurance of salvation, grounded in right doctrine.
- A mature man. The church must manifest maturity in critical areas of discipleship: committed to growth achieved through the Word of God, prayer, worship, and fellowship; producing the fruit of the Spirit, demonstrating love, keeping God's commandments, and bearing witness to the Lord.
- No longer children. Members of the Body must be able to discern false doctrines and to distinguish truth from error. To put it in terms we've already discussed, believers must be equipped with a Christian world-view.³
- Speaking the truth in love. Church members articulate the truth of Christ to one another and to those outside the Body. They confront errors with love rather than condescension.

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

- Every joint supplies. The individual members cultivate their spiritual gifts, using them to the glory of God in ministry to one another and for the community.
- The growth of the Body. All of this increases the church both quantitatively and qualitatively.⁴

Note the role Paul assigns to the pastor in the process of building the Body.⁵ Contrary to popular impressions today, the pastor is not paid to do ministry. Pastors and teachers are to equip the saints—that's us—to serve, to build the Body, to *be* the church in the world and do the work of ministry. Every layperson is to be equipped as a minister of the gospel.

French social critic Jacques Ellul put it well:

The channel through which the Holy Spirit brings truth to the world is the pastor, who teaches it to the laity, who in turn translate it and put it to work in the marketplace, infiltrating the world. The problem in the modern church, however, Ellul says, is that the channel is blocked. The pastor doesn't engage in the secular world on a day-in, day-out basis, and the laypeople, who do, tend to keep their faith in a compartment separate from the rest of their lives.⁶

So Sunday after Sunday congregations sit passively—like spectators watching the entertainment up front—missing the fact that they should be absorbing the truth and applying it to their lives, training to be effective soldiers of the cross.

I cannot help but see parallels here with my experience in marine officers' basic training. The marines, if you'll pardon an old leatherneck's pride, do it right.

During the first grueling weeks we were put through intense physical training on death-defying obstacle courses. We learned to handle and clean a rifle, and to disassemble and reassemble it blindfolded. We memorized the marine handbook of military rules and regimen (and no one argued about whether the rules were relevant or accepted by a majority of marines). Our hearts and minds were imprinted forever with the meaning of discipline. (I remember once cracking the slightest smile during inspection. The result? "Fifty push-ups, Colson!")

From there it was on to the rifle range and small-unit tactics. Then field maneuvers. And while all of this was simulated warfare, no one treated it like a game. When I was in training, the Korean War was at its bloodiest; young men just out of school were leading other young men in deadly combat. Many came home in pine boxes. So we were serious not only about surviving combat, but about winning it.

It should be the same for the soldiers of the cross. Yet rather than being well-trained, well-disciplined, functioning members of the Body, many of us act more like reserve units: weekend warriors whose real jobs occupy them during the week and who just turn out for occasional drills.

If we take our Handbook seriously, we have to conclude that the church is the basic school of discipline and training for all Christians. And shouldn't our training be at least as serious as the military? After all, we are in warfare. And the battle is not just for flesh and blood; it is for eternal souls.

Nineteenth-century British missionaries knew this. Departing from England for Africa, many packed their possessions in long, narrow wooden boxes: their own coffins. They knew that, more than likely, they would return home in those coffins. Felled by disease, exhaustion, and violence, many did.

Every part of the church should be geared for the training (discipling and equipping) of the local units that fight this battle. Evangelistic ministries should be directing new believers into the church particular. Discipleship ministries should be working hand in hand with local congregations. Specialized ministries—such as service to the disabled, to youth, to executives, to the inner city, to prisoners—should be guiding those they reach into local congregations, even as they are equipping those same local churches with the skills, resources, encouragement, and education they need to do effective ministry in these unique areas.⁷

In fact, whether these parachurch ministries are building up the Body is perhaps the best test of their biblical fidelity. Those that aren't cooperating with and equipping the work of local churches run the risk of ending up promoting their own cause over the good of the Body and thus being outside of God's plan. (This has been a real problem among evangelicals. One great strength of the movement is its vitality: independent, dynamic leaders raising up powerful organizations to do important work. But human nature being what it is, this can also be a weakness when those

same leaders become protective of their turf or fall into the trap of the personality cult.)

So the church must first build strong disciples and then equip its men and women for battle in the world.

TRAINING FOR BATTLE

Since a biblical world-view involves all of life, the church must equip its members for all of life. Like the military, this begins with the basics and moves on to building the mature character of the seasoned warrior.

There are hundreds of diverse and creative ways to train Christians to be the people of God so that they, together, can do those "greater things" to which Christ referred. We cannot cover all the areas of equipping, let alone include even a fraction of the particular churches doing a great job preparing their people for ministry. But we can touch upon training areas that should be a part of every church—with a few representative examples.

At the most fundamental level, the church must equip its members to know and defend their faith and to apply it in the world. The ministry of the Word is the beginning. The Christian disciple must be grounded in the Word and historic Christian orthodoxy. Without this basic training, we are unable to give a reasonable defense for the hope within us.⁸

Most churches do a good job with Sunday school and Bible studies, but they can also make use of parachurch resources like the Navigators, which produces excellent discipleship material. Or they might take advantage of Walk Thru the Bible, which gives Christians a big-picture perspective on the Old and New Testaments. And I personally have profited greatly from Ligonier Ministries' seminars, tapes, and videos on doctrine.

Those seeking more advanced skills can take advantage of lay seminary training like that offered by the Seminary of the East, located in New York and Philadelphia. Some larger churches like Elmbrook in Waukesha, Wisconsin, provide similar courses, enabling students to receive credit through nearby Trinity College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. A number of Catholic dioceses do the same thing, as in Washington, D.C. where Education for Parish Service (EPS) requires two years of academic study combined with practical work in the attendee's parish. And then

there's Prison Fellowship's Wilberforce Forum, which offers college credit courses in biblical world-view, with credit given by Union University of Jackson, Tennessee. We will soon have courses for the seminary level as well as for pastors and Christian leaders.⁹

Discipling can also include applying a biblical perspective to current events. Some friends in Florida initiated a tough-minded "life issues" course in their parish. They met weekly to study timely issues, from just-war theory to the New Age movement to abortion to the question, "Does truth exist?" One hundred people turned out for that last one.

Why leave it to the League of Women Voters or the local university to lead discussions on the concerns of the day? The church should be aggressively training its people to be discerning and to speak out of the convictions of an equipped Christian mind.

In this same vein, the church should equip its members to lead exemplary lives in the marketplace, particularly in today's scandal-ridden corporate environment. Ethics training should be a prime task of the church. For one thing, if we fail to do this, we produce members who follow the world's standards rather than the Bible's, and the results will detract from our witness at large, as we mentioned in chapter 18.

But the larger call for the church to be the guiding voice for sound morality in culture comes because the church has the unique authority to do so. Sound ethical principles result from a binding moral law, the very thing society has rejected as it has driven absolute standards based on Judeo-Christian revelation from modern life. As we argued earlier, postmodern academicians, thinkers, writers, and value-free educators have embraced a dogmatic relativism and therefore have no unchanging standard by which to determine whether any particular business, biomedical, political, or personal choice is good or evil. So business schools may say they are teaching ethics, but in reality, they are not. They cannot.

The University of Michigan's curriculum for a business school class called "Ethics of Corporate Management" admits as much. "This course is not concerned with personal moral issues of honesty and truthfulness . . . it is assumed that the students of this university have already formed their own standards on these issues."¹⁰ So each student's perceptions of "honesty

and truthfulness" are based on what is right in his or her own eyes. This is not ethics.

Similarly, according to a 2002 poll, three-quarters of college students surveyed said that professors taught them that what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity. Only 25 percent were taught that there is a clear standard of right and wrong. When asked to rank which business practice was most important, 38 percent of students chose "recruiting a diverse work force in which women and minorities are advanced and promoted." Only 23 percent chose "providing clear and accurate business statements to stockholders and creditors."¹¹

Churches must equip their members with an understanding of ethics based on enduring moral truths that are binding on all people at all times. One ministry designed to assist congregations in this area is the Executive Leadership Foundation, a resource center that teaches Christians how to apply absolute values in tough, realistic scenarios. The goal? That Christians "would have an impact" in their sphere of influence, whatever that is.¹²

The church must also equip its members to build strong marriages and families. The family, the most basic unit of civilized society, is the institution that may well be under the greatest attack in society today. Unless we insist on counseling and training before marriage, and then provide a full range of services to build and strengthen the family thereafter, the church cannot say it is making disciples and fulfilling the Great Commission. This is why the ministry of Jim Dobson's Focus on the Family is so critical, and every church can profit from it.¹³

For more than sixty years the Catholic Church has sought to strengthen marriages by requiring couples who wish to marry in the church to participate in PreCana, which focuses on practical and theological teachings about marriage and exposes young couples to mentoring relationships with older couples.

Similarly, as Mike McManus has contended so well in his book, *Marriage Savers*, couples with solid, seasoned marriages provide a great resource within the church for strengthening other marriages and preventing divorce.¹⁴ Young couples greatly increase their chances of staying married if they are mentored by those who can draw on years of experience in how to best resolve conflicts, improve communication, and cherish one another.

This kind of mentoring speaks to Paul's principle in Titus, that older women are to "train the younger women to love their husbands and children." In the early church, the older generation was expected to mentor the younger one.

Mike McManus's Marriage Savers has also instituted an even more ambitious idea: Community Marriage Policies, a uniform requirement that all the local churches—Catholic and Protestant, liberal and conservative, black and white—adopt together, in order to radically reduce a given community's divorce rate. Typically, clergy agree to require engaged couples to undergo four months of marriage preparation, including a premarital inventory to evaluate the maturity of the relationship, and mentoring from older couples.

Community Marriage Policies are now in place in hundreds of cities, with dramatic results. In Modesto, California, the first city to adopt a Community Marriage Policy more than twenty years ago, divorce rates plunged 47 percent.¹⁵

"Clearly," says McManus, thinking big, "we hold in our hands the answer to America's divorce rate."

However, the troubling question is, Will we accept the challenge? W. Bradford Wilcox, a researcher on religion at Yale University, writes that America's houses of worship are "traditionally the most important custodians of marriage in the nation." And yet, he concludes, they "have been unable and unwilling to foster the beliefs and virtues that make for a strong marriage culture."¹⁶

What an indictment! But it is one we can—and must—answer.

In the same way that churches should be the training ground for healthy marriages, they need to equip their members to "train up their children in the way they should go." It is every Christian parent's responsibility to raise his or her children in the fear and admonition of the Lord—and it is every church body's responsibility to help them do that. Part of that training means equipping parents to be discerning in educational issues. Vigilance is the essential watchword for families whose children attend public schools.

When the Fairfax, Virginia, County School Board proposed a "value-free" curriculum designed for kindergarten through twelfth grade, parents

at McLean Presbyterian Church examined the program and discovered that it undermined biblical moral values. So they organized an "information night" to alert parents to the issues involved, and then encouraged parents to make their voices heard at school board meetings. While they did not get the curriculum changed, Christian parents did build relationships with the staffs at the schools in question, and they were also able to change a few components of the program. And, having been educated in the curriculum material, many who otherwise would not have been aware opted to take their children out of the offensive classes.

Sometimes the church needs to help children who have been forced to grow old before their time. In designing their program to work with children of divorced parents, the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California found a good model in the Catholic Church's "Rainbows for All God's Children." So fifteen people from First Evangelical were trained by a group of nuns in a nearby parish, who seemed to particularly delight in anointing their Protestant brothers and sisters with oil and ashes at the dedication service.

Fifty children were part of the first group at Fullerton, and church volunteers taught them Bible memory verses to help comfort and strengthen them in times of need as well as helping them learn how to express their feelings and work through their emotions.

At Faithful Central Missionary Baptist Church in South Central Los Angeles, Christian Education Minister LaVerne Tolbert and her volunteers provide Christian education in a real combat zone. The neighborhood is overrun by gangs and drugs, and teen pregnancy is commonplace. There, through role plays, frank Friday night discussions, and Bible study, the church equips kids not only to say no, but to call on the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to do so.¹⁷

The church should equip its members to fulfill their various vocations. In the Reformation era, helping believers find their vocation was considered a key step of discipleship. Since our work is to bring glory to God, the church needs to teach a high view of labor and the Christian character traits of diligence, thrift, creativity, and excellence. If the church doesn't teach a healthy work ethic, who will?¹⁸

The church is also the natural place to provide vocational counseling. To

do this, a number of congregations across the country use "gifts analysis inventories," which not only highlight an individual's spiritual gifts, but also focus on his or her strengths and aptitudes.

In Los Angeles, Victory Outreach, which evangelizes and disciples heroin addicts, provides an outstanding example of the church equipping believers with a healthy work ethic. Once clean of drugs, the participants spend nine months in intensive Bible study and training, breaking the old patterns of the streets and establishing basic Christian character and behavior. After that, they enter a nine-month reentry phase, during which they develop their work skills.

The church should equip its people to be good stewards of financial resources. The Presbyterian Church in America regularly offers seminars at individual churches to help believers manage their resources and determine how to maximize their charitable giving. Ron Blue of Atlanta is well-known in evangelical circles for his expertise in financial planning, investment management services, and estate and tax planning. Blue's books, including the *Personal Financial Planning Guide*, and his six-part videotape series, "Master Your Money," are excellent tools for church groups seeking to be good stewards.

Another great resource is Crown Financial Ministries. In it, two strong ministries, Larry Burkett's Christian Financial Concepts and Howard Dayton's Crown Ministries, took the unusual step of merging. It made sense: Crown was doing a great job equipping Christians with a biblical view of stewardship with small study groups in many local churches. Meanwhile Burkett's Christian Financial Concepts was running seminars for businesspeople on how to manage their companies, based on Christian principles, seminars for married couples on how to budget, as well as financial management training sessions for laity. Burkett was reaching individual people all over the world, but he wanted to root his ministry in the local church. So the two stewardship ministries combined forces, with the goal of reaching and training three hundred million people over the next fifteen years!¹⁹

All believers are called to be witnesses, both in word and in deed. Thus, the church needs to train laypeople to identify their own evangelistic gifts and use them effectively in the marketplace. Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, offers a seminar called "Network," designed to

help members of that huge congregation identify spiritual gifts. Those with the gift of evangelism are directed into a training seminar where the first lesson "is called 'Being Yourself.' We want people to understand that they don't have to be Billy Graham in order to be salt and light," says the program's founder. "They can be themselves and reach people that Billy Graham can't."

Another well-known and powerful ministry is Evangelism Explosion (EE), which started in the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. EE has spread across the country, training laypeople to share their faith comfortably and effectively. But, as Dr. James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge, emphasizes, evangelism is not an end in itself. Rather it exists in the context of loving discipleship relationships. So EE includes three levels of discipleship: trainer and trainee, EE participants and other members of the church, and new believers and their spiritual parents. The program consists of sixteen units of class instruction, homework assignments, and on-the-job training.

When Ellen was in Cuba recently, she met pastors who have been trained in Evangelism Explosion's principles and are using them in their home churches. One such church in a fishing village near Havana has grown from one hundred to four hundred members in five years, and the members have also planted four daughter churches during that time. (Ellen's Cuban government-supplied tour guide, unfamiliar with evangelical terms, had no clue how to translate "Evangelism Explosion." He kept muttering about *la bomba!*)

And finally, the church must equip its people with specialized training that enables them to reach out to those in particular types of physical and spiritual need. A particular church's ministry will vary depending on location, cultural context, and the unique vision and burdens of its members. A church in a Cuban fishing village may well focus on different needs than a suburban church outside Boston. Whatever the particular needs, however, compassion ministries are tough, front-line work, and many churches have developed great programs for training believers to do them well.

One great outside resource is the Stephen Ministry, begun in the late 1970s by a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, Dr. Kenneth Haugk. This interdenominational effort equips Christians with caregiving skills for people in

crisis situations. Those who seek training must pay a fee for the fifty-hour core course, during which they develop counseling and other practical skills. Upon graduation, "Stephen ministers" work in every arena of need.

One key ministry field for believers is among prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. In Prison Fellowship's work with churches across the country, we've clearly seen the importance of solid training. Loving Christians can, with the noblest of motives, make a mess of prison ministry. They may buttonhole prisoners with tracts, respond naively to prisoners' requests, or promise things they can't deliver, which amounts to just another "rejection" in the prisoner's life. Training is critical. So PF requires laypeople to complete twenty hours of training courses in order to be certified as volunteers.²⁰

As the church equips its people to minister to the living, it needs to train them as well to deal with death and disease. Many churches have done this with special ministries like "Bridges," a cancer support and Bible study group at Elmbrook Church. Members pray together, help one another with practical concerns, and shepherd each other through the rough times that affect both the individual sufferer and the family. They also seek to discern the spiritual opportunities that come through suffering.

Another vital ministry in our society is outreach to homosexuals: "Harvest" is just such a ministry in urban Philadelphia.

Tenth Presbyterian Church is located in the middle of a downtown neighborhood that caters to gay bars and homosexual meeting areas. Recognizing the need and the mission field in its own backyard, in 1984 the church began a Bible study for anyone interested in being freed from homosexuality; they began running a two-line advertisement in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Homosexuals and Lesbians Can Change," followed by the Harvest phone number. Crank calls aside, Harvest heard from hundreds of people who had almost lost hope, and the ad now garners thousands of calls every year. Hundreds of men and women who felt trapped in homosexual lifestyles have been freed.

Hope, a companion ministry, seeks to help those who have contracted AIDS, tenderly offering them real help and spiritual healing. Ministries like this sensitize and equip the church to articulate a godly response to one of the great needs of our day.

Harvest's full-time director, John Freeman, understands the church's role: "It is within the church that healing, fellowship, growth, and maturing in Christ are to take place. It is therefore one of our goals to transfer dependence of an individual from Harvest to a caring local church as soon as we can.

"Speaking the truth in love," he adds, "this ministry brings the resources of the church to bear on the problem of homosexuality. It is an important part of any effort to reach modern America for Christ."²¹

As a local ministry, Harvest is a member of Exodus, an interdenominational ministry offering resources to help Christians, their loved ones, and others find freedom from homosexuality. Exodus includes 135 local Christian ministries in seventeen nations.²²

This, of course, is only a sample of the tremendous churches and ministries that are effectively equipping believers to be the Body in the world today. But all such ministries share one singular characteristic: They focus on the Head of the Body, Christ Himself. As human beings, we can focus on ourselves, doing all the right things to meet spiritual, physical, and emotional needs . . . but if we do so with the wrong attitude, and in our own strength, all our good works are for naught. This is why the church's primary focus must always be on developing the Christlike character of its people.

When members of the church at Corinth were squabbling about their various gifts, the apostle Paul told them that the greatest gift—that which characterized their Lord—was love. So as we serve one another in the Body and reach to those beyond, we are to do so with the same loving, humble attitude as Jesus Himself. We must think more of others than of ourselves, caring most for "the least of these."

Nothing could be more at odds with the way of the world. Today's celebrity-mad culture is impressed and obsessed with power and position, fame and influence, not selfless service.