

www.ShepherdServe.org

You are welcome to distribute printed copies of this document, or copy and paste this document to distribute via email, as long as the document is unaltered and kept in its *entirety* (including copyright notices), and is not sold for profit. However, if you wish to post this material on your website or anywhere else online, you must first contact us to get permission. ©2007 by David Servant

The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Three Continuing Properly

For many years and in many ways, I unknowingly followed practices that worked against the goal that God wanted me to pursue, the goal of making disciples. But gradually, the Holy Spirit graciously opened my eyes to my errors. One thing I've learned is this: I should question everything I've been taught and believed in light of God's Word. Our traditions, more than anything else, blind us to what God has said. Worse, we are very *proud* of our traditions, certain that we stand among an elite group who has a greater grasp of truth than other Christians. As one teacher sarcastically said, "There are 32,000 denominations in the world today. Aren't you fortunate to be a member of the one that is right?"

As a result of our pride, God resists us, because He resists the proud. If we want to make any progress and be fully ready to stand before Jesus, we must humble ourselves. To those, God gives grace.

The Role of the Pastor Considered

The minister's goal of making disciples should shape everything he does in ministry. He should continually be asking himself, "How does what I'm doing contribute to the process of making disciples who will obey all of Jesus' commandments?" That simple test question, if asked honestly, would eliminate much that is done under the banner of Christian activity.

Let us consider the ministry of the pastor/elder/overseer,¹ a person whose ministry assignment focuses him on a specific local church. If that person is going to make disciples who obey all of Jesus' commandments, what should be one of his primary responsibilities? *Teaching* naturally comes to mind. Jesus said that disciples are made by the means of teaching (see Matt. 28:19-20). A requirement for one to be an elder/pastor/overseer is that he be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Those who "work hard at preaching and teaching" should "be considered worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17).

¹ It seems quite clear that a pastor (the Greek noun is *poimain*, meaning *shepherd*) is equivalent to an elder (the Greek noun *presbuteros*), and is also equivalent to an overseer (the Greek noun *episkopos*, translated *bishop* in the KJV). Paul, for example, instructed the Ephesian *elders* (*presbuteros*), whom he said the Holy Spirit had made *overseers* (*episkopos*), to *shepherd* (the Greek verb *poimaino*) the flock of God (see Acts 20:28). He also used the terms *elders* (*presbuteros*) and *overseers* (*episkopos*) synonymously in Titus 1:5-7. Peter, too, exhorted the elders (*presbuteros*) to shepherd (*poimaino*) the flock (see 1 Pet. 5:1-2). The idea that a bishop (the KJV translation of *episkopos*) is a higher office than pastor or elder, and is one who oversees numerous churches is a human invention.

Therefore, a pastor should evaluate every sermon by asking himself this question, "How does this sermon help accomplish the task of making disciples?"

Is a pastor's teaching responsibility fulfilled, however, solely by means of his Sunday or midweek sermons? If he thinks so, he overlooks the fact that Scripture indicates his teaching responsibility is *primarily* fulfilled by the life he lives and the example he sets. The teaching example of his daily life is simply supplemented by his public teaching ministry. That is why the requirements for elders/pastors/overseers have much more to do with a person's character and lifestyle than his verbal communication skills. Of fifteen requirements listed for overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, fourteen are related to character and only one to teaching ability. Of the eighteen requirements listed for elders in Titus 1:5-9, seventeen are related to character and only one to teaching ability. Paul first reminded Timothy, "In speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an *example* of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:12, emphasis added). He *then* said, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13). Thus the example of Timothy's character was mentioned before his public teaching ministry, underscoring its greater importance.

Peter similarly wrote:

I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, *but proving to be examples to the flock* (1 Pet. 5:1-3, emphasis added).

Who inspires us to deny ourselves and obey Christ? Is it those whose sermons we admire or those whose lives we admire? Uncommitted, soft-style pastors inspire no one to take up their cross. If such pastors do preach an occasional message of commitment to Christ, they must preach in vague generalities, otherwise their listeners would question their sincerity. *Most of the great Christian leaders of the past are not remembered for their sermons, but for their sacrifices.* Their example inspires us long after they are gone.

If a pastor is not setting an example of obedience as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, he is wasting his time delivering any sermons. Pastor, your example speaks ten times louder than your sermons. Are you inspiring people to deny themselves and follow Christ by denying yourself and following Christ?

But how can a pastor, by means of the example of his lifestyle, teach people who primarily know him as a Sunday-morning orator? The closest they actually get to seeing him live his life is a five-second handshake as they dutifully exit the church building. Perhaps there is something not quite right about the modern pastoral model.

The Weekly Sunday Morning Sermon

A pastor makes another wrong assumption if he thinks that his teaching responsibility is primarily one of delivering *weekly public lectures*. Jesus' teaching ministry consisted not only of public sermons (and for the most part, it seems they were fairly short), but also of private conversations that were initiated by His inquisitive disciples. Moreover, such conversations were not limited to one half-hour of one day of the week at a church building, but occurred along seashores, in homes, and walking along dusty roads, as Jesus lived His life in full view of His disciples. That same teaching model was followed by the apostles. After Pentecost, the twelve taught "in the temple and from *house to house*" (Acts 5:42, emphasis added). They had daily interaction with the community of believers. Paul also taught "publicly and from *house to house*" (Acts 20:20, emphasis added).

At this point, if you are a pastor, you may be comparing your teaching ministry to that

of Jesus and the first apostles. Perhaps you are even beginning to wonder if what you have been doing is what God intends for you to do, or are you just doing more of what hundreds of years of church traditions have taught you to do? If you *are* wondering, that is good. That is *very* good. That is the first step in the right direction.

Maybe you've thought even further. Perhaps you said to yourself, "Where could I ever find the time that such a ministry would require, teaching people from house to house, or involving them in my daily life so that I primarily influence them by my example?" Now that is a *wonderful* question, because it could lead you to keep wondering if there is something even more wrong with the modern concept of the pastor's role.

Perhaps you even thought to yourself, "I'm not sure I would want to live my life so closely with people in my church. I was taught in Bible school that a pastor should never get too close to his congregation. He must keep some distance in order to maintain their professional respect. He can't be close friends with them."

Such a thought reveals that something is indeed *very* wrong with the way things are so often done in the modern church. Jesus was so close with the twelve that one of them felt quite comfortable leaning his head on His breast at a common meal (see John 13:23-25). They literally lived together for several years. So much for keeping a professional distance from one's disciples in order to successfully minister to them!

A Comparison of Methods, Ancient and Modern

If the goal is to obey Jesus and make disciples, wouldn't we be wise to follow His methods for making disciples? They worked quite well for Him. They also worked quite well for the apostles who followed Him.

And how well are modern methods working to make disciples who obey all of Christ's commandments? When studies of American Christians, for example, repeatedly show that there is virtually no difference in the lifestyles of most professing Christians when compared to non-Christians, maybe its time to ask some questions and re-examine Scripture.

Here is a revealing question to ask ourselves: How did the early church succeed so well at making disciples without any church buildings, professionally-trained clergy, Bible schools and seminaries, hymnals and overhead projectors, wireless microphones and tape duplicators, Sunday school curriculums and youth ministries, worship teams and choirs, computers and copy machines, Christian radio and TV stations, hundreds of thousands of Christian book titles and even personally-owned Bibles? *They didn't need any of those things to make disciples, and neither did Jesus.* And because none of those things were essential then, *none are essential now.* They *could* be helpful, but none are essential. In fact, *many of those things can and actually do hinder us from making disciples.* Let me give you two examples.

Let's first consider the modern essential of having only Bible school- or seminary-trained pastors lead churches. *Such was an unheard of concept to Paul.* In some cities, after he planted churches, he departed for a few weeks or months, and then returned to appoint elders to oversee them (see, for example, Acts 13:14-14:23). That means those churches, absent from Paul's presence, had no formal eldership for some weeks or months, and that most elders were fairly young believers when they were appointed. They had nothing close to a two- or three-year formal education that prepared them for their job.

Thus, *the Bible teaches that pastors/elders/overseers do not need two or three years of formal education to be effective in their ministry.* No one can intelligently argue against that fact. Yet the modern requirement continually sends a message to every believer: "If you want to be a leader in the church, you need years of formal education."² This slows the process of

² The modern emphasis on professionally-trained clergy is in many ways a symptom of a larger disease, that of equating the gaining of knowledge with spiritual growth. We think that the person who knows more is more spiritually mature, whereas he may be less so, puffed up with pride from all he has learned. Paul did write, "knowledge makes arrogant" (1

creating leaders, thus slowing the making of disciples, thus slowing the expansion of the church. I wonder how well the American companies Avon and Amway would have saturated their targeted markets if they required every salesperson to move his or her family to another city to receive three years of formal training before he or she could be released to sell soap or perfume?

“But pastoring is such a difficult and complex task!” some say. “The Bible says we shouldn’t put a new convert in the position of an overseer” (see 1 Tim. 3:6).

First, it comes down to the definition of a new convert, and clearly Paul’s concept was different than ours, because he assigned people to the office of elder/pastor/overseer who had only been believers for a few months.

Second, one reason modern pastoring is so difficult and complex is because our entire system of church structure and ministry is so far removed from the biblical model. We’ve made it so complex that indeed, only a few super-human people can survive its demands!

“But God forbid that a church might be overseen by someone without a Bible school or seminary education!” others say. “That untrained overseer might lead his flock into false teaching!”

That apparently wasn’t Paul’s concern. The fact is that today we have Bible-school and seminary-trained clergy who don’t believe in the virgin birth, who approve of homosexuality, who teach that God wants everyone to drive a luxury automobile, who claim that God predestines some people to be damned, or who say without flinching that one can gain heaven without obedience to Christ. The modern Bible school and seminary have often served to *further* false doctrine, and the professional clergy have served to further it more.

Church “commoners” are afraid to challenge them, because the professionals have been to seminary and can pull out more “proof texts.” Moreover, those clergy have defined and divided their churches from the rest of the body of Christ by their peculiar doctrines, to the point of even advertising those differences by the very names they place on signs in front of their church buildings, sending a message to the world: “We are not like those other Christians.” To add further injury, they label anyone who disagrees with their unchallengeable and divisive doctrines as “divisive.” The Inquisition is still very much alive and well, led by men with diplomas. *Is this the example Jesus wants set by those who are supposed to be making disciples who are known to the world by their love for one another?*

Christians now choose churches based upon particular doctrines, and having the right theology has become the most important thing rather than having the right lifestyle, all because a biblical model has been abandoned.

A Biblical Alternative

Am I advocating taking three-month old believers and giving them oversight over churches (the very thing that Paul did)? Yes, but only if those believers meet the biblical requirements for elders/overseers, and *only if they are given oversight of churches that follow a biblical model*. That is, those churches must first of all be newly-planted gatherings that are submitted to a mature founding minister, such as an apostle, who can provide some oversight.³ That way, newly-appointed elders are not entirely on their own.

Second, the congregations must be small enough to meet in homes, as did the early churches.⁴ That makes churches much more manageable. That is probably why one of the

Cor. 8:1). And surely the person who listens to daily boring lectures for two or three years is prepared to give weekly boring lectures!

³ In Paul’s first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus he mentions leaving them behind to appoint elders/overseers in the churches. So Timothy and Titus would have provided oversight to those elders/overseers for some time. They would have probably periodically met with the elders/overseers to disciple them, as Paul wrote, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

⁴ See Acts 2:2, 46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2; 2 John 1:10

requirements for elders/overseers is that they successfully manage their own households (see 1 Tim. 3:4-5). Managing a small “household of faith” is not much more challenging than managing a family.

Third, the congregation must consist of people who have responded in repentance to a *biblical* gospel, and who are thus genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. That eliminates all of the challenges that arise from trying to pastor sheep who are actually goats.

And fourth, the pastors/elders/overseers must follow their biblical role rather than a cultural role. That is, they must not hold a central, all-important, spotlight position as they do in most modern churches.⁵ Rather, they must be single parts of the entire body, humble servants who teach by example and precept, and whose goal is to make disciples, not by being Sunday-morning orators, but by following Jesus’ methods.

When that pattern is followed, then *some* three-month-old believers can oversee churches.

Church Buildings

What about church buildings? They are another modern “essential” that the early church did quite well without. Do they help in the process of disciple-making?

When I was a pastor, I often felt more like a realtor, banker, general contractor, and a professional fundraiser. I’ve dreamed of buildings, searched for buildings, remodeled old buildings, rented buildings, built new buildings and repaired them when God sent rain through their cracks. Buildings consume lots of time and energy. The reason I did so much that revolved around buildings is because I was certain, like most pastors, that there was no way to succeed without a building, a place for the church to gather.

Buildings also consume money, lots of it. (In the United States, some congregations spend tens of millions of dollars on their church buildings.) After my dreams of having buildings were fulfilled, I often dreamed of the day when the mortgages on my buildings would be paid off, so we could use all that money for ministry. It once occurred to me, as I was teaching my congregation about good stewardship and getting out of debt, that I had put the whole of us in debt together! (I was certainly teaching by example.)

Most church buildings are used for a couple of hours once or twice a week. What other organization in the entire world builds buildings that will be used so little? (Answer: only cults and false religions.)

That money-sucking hole causes a lot of problems. A pastor with a building always needs a flow of money, and that affects what he does. He is tempted to cater to the wealthy (who often give without any sacrifice), compromise any teaching that might offend some, and twist Scripture to make it serve his end. His sermons gravitate to subjects that don’t hinder the money flow and encourage its increase. Because of that, Christians sometimes begin to think that the most important aspects of being believers are (1) paying tithes (which, incidentally, Jesus said is a minor commandment) and (2) attending church (where the tithes are collected each Sunday). This is hardly the picture of disciple making. Yet many pastors dream of having congregations where everyone would just do those two things. If a pastor had a congregation where just half of the people would do those two things, he could write books and sell his secrets to millions of other pastors!

The facts reveal this: *There is no record of any congregation buying or constructing a building*

⁵ It is notable that Paul’s letters to the churches are addressed to *everyone* in the various churches, and not to the elders or overseers. In only two of his letters to the churches does Paul even *mention* elders/pastors/overseers. In one instance they are included in the salutation, added as if he didn’t want them to think that they were excluded recipients (see Phil. 1:1). In another instance Paul mentions pastors among a list of ministers who equip the saints (see Eph. 4:11-12). It is also especially notable how Paul makes no mention of the role of elders as he gives certain instructions that we would think would involve elders, such as administering the Lord’s Supper, and the resolution of conflicts between Christians. All of this points to the fact that elders/pastors did not hold the central, all-important role that they hold in most modern churches.

in the book of Acts. For the most part, believers met regularly in homes.⁶ There were never any collections for building funds. There are no instructions in the epistles for church building construction. Additionally, no one thought of building a church building until Christianity was 300 years old, when the church married the world under Constantine's edict. Three-hundred years! Think of how long that is! And the church flourished and multiplied exponentially, even during times of intense persecution, all without buildings. Such phenomena have been repeated many times in the centuries that followed. It has happened in China rather recently. There are probably more than a million house churches in China.

Eleven O'Clock Sunday is the Most Segregated Hour

Modern church facilities that copy the American model are expected to have, at a minimum, enough divided space to provide separate rooms for separate ministries to all age groups. In the early church, however, special segregated ministries for men, women, and all age groups of children were unheard of. The church was unified in every sense, not fragmented in every sense. The family unit was kept together, and parental spiritual responsibility was reinforced by church structure, rather than eroded by it as it has under modern church structure.

Does a church building contribute to the making of disciples or hinder it? Historically, disciple making throughout the centuries has succeeded better without them, and for many good reasons.

Meeting in houses, as did the early church for the first three centuries, where a joy-filled meal, teachings, songs, and spiritual gifts were shared for probably three to five hours, provided an environment for genuine spiritual growth for believers. Members of Christ's body felt like participators, as they sat facing each other, rather than how modern church attendees feel—like spectators in a theater, seated to look at the backs of each other's heads while trying not to miss the show on the stage. The casual atmosphere of a common meal led to transparency, authentic caring relationships and true fellowship, of no comparison to modern "fellowship," which too often is little more than a shallow shaking of hands with complete strangers in the next pew when the pastor gives the cue.

Teachings were more like question and answer sessions and open discussions among equals, rather than lectures given by those who wore odd clothing, spoke in theatrical voices, and stood high above the polite (and often bored) audience. Pastors didn't "prepare a weekly sermon." Anyone (certainly including the elders/pastors/overseers) might receive a teaching that the Holy Spirit gave.

When a house became cramped, the elder(s) wouldn't think of obtaining a bigger building. Rather, everyone knew that they had to split into two house meetings, and it was just a matter of finding the mind of the Spirit regarding where the new meeting should be held and who should provide the oversight. Fortunately, they didn't have to collect resumes of strangers and church-growth theorists in order to scrutinize their philosophical or doctrinal slant; there were already aspiring overseers right among them, who had on-the-job training and already knew the members of their future little flock. That new house church had the opportunity to reach out evangelistically in a new area, and demonstrate to unbelievers what Christians were—people who loved one another. They could invite unbelievers to their meetings as easy as inviting them over for a meal.

The Blessed Pastor

No house church pastor/elder/overseer suffered ministerial "burnout" because of being overwhelmed with pastoral responsibilities, something that is widespread in the modern

⁶ See Acts 2:2, 46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2; 2 John 1:10

church. (One study reported that 1,800 pastors are leaving the ministry per month in the U.S.) He had only a small flock to look after, and if that flock supplied his financial needs so that the ministry was his vocation, he actually had time to pray, meditate, preach the gospel to unbelievers, assist the poor, visit and pray for the sick, and spend quality time equipping new disciples to do all those things right along with him. Church administration was simple.

He worked in unison with the other elders/pastors/overseers in his region. There was no striving to have “the biggest church in town” or compete with his fellow pastors to have the “best youth ministry” or the “most exciting kids’ church program.” People didn’t go to church meetings to judge how good the worship team performed or how entertaining the pastor was. They had been born again and loved Jesus and His people. They loved to eat together and share whatever gifts God had given them. Their goal was to obey Jesus and be ready to stand at His judgment seat.

To be sure, there were problems in house churches, and those are addressed in the epistles. But so many of the problems that inevitably plague modern churches and hinder disciple making were unheard of in the early church, simply because their model of the local church was so different than what evolved after the third century and since the dark ages. Again, allow this fact to sink in: *There were no church buildings until the beginning of the fourth century. If you had lived during the first three centuries, how would your ministry have been different than it is now?*

In summary, the more closely we follow biblical patterns, the more effective we will be in accomplishing God’s goal of making disciples. The greatest hindrances to disciple making in churches today stem from unbiblical structures and practices.