

Faith Pulpit

Functional Churches

The local church is the only visible expression of the universal church, the body of Christ. As such, a living body must function consistently and well. In practical ways, though, how can the leaders of the local assembly bring Biblical body function into being? One fact remains startlingly clear. Christians do not grow in isolation. There needs to be a commonality with each other. Further, New Testament Christians were not given the choice as to whether or not they wished to function. They were told to. In fact, grace was given to each one to help each believer function for the good of all believers in the assembly (Ephesians 4:7). The only question left unanswered is how such mutual edification is to be promoted.

One fact stands well apart from other possibilities. The Word of God must gain entrance into believer's minds and be assimilated into every act of Christian conduct and service. The local church, in a very special way, must be its own Bible institute.

The day has passed in which local churches can be content simply to offer casual teaching through stultified educational norms to people who have no clear idea of what a Christian or a local church is, to say nothing of their inability to elaborate on their functions.

A fact that appears to be lost on modern churches is that the local churches of New Testament times adequately trained their saints within the fellowship for the total ministry of the church. There were no colleges, seminaries, or assorted training institutions that trained the clergy for their work. After all, in New Testament times, letters to individuals and churches communicated intense truth that the loftiest of intellects have grappled with, often to their own confusion and that of others. But the point remains that the local church of the New Testament provided the only vehicle for the training and service of New Testament Christians.

One of the greatest needs, then, in Christian education today is the need to make the local church a school. This presupposes that the Bible should be the textbook for every believer. A good school will have teachers that have learned how to involve the students in the discovery of the Bible for themselves. Closely associated with this is the need for Bible memory work to aid in the assimilation of truth and in the learning of it.

Webster defines research as the “careful, systematic, patient study and investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken to establish facts or principles.” In any field of knowledge, diligent research is necessary for the mastery of the subject. This research involves the accumulation of facts, the analysis and interpretation of those facts, and the correct application of them to the problems of everyday experience.

The Bible is no exception to this principle. If a student of the Bible is to ascertain its message, he must give himself to rigorous study. Luke commented with favor concerning the Bereans, “These were more noble . . . in that they received the word with readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

Biblical research includes two areas of study: hermeneutics and methodology. The believer must have essential rules provided him so that he can accurately interpret Scripture, and then he must know the steps necessary for discovering Scriptural truths and arranging them in a logical and effective manner. It should be abundantly clear that the teachers themselves should have a thorough grasp of the Scriptures and be effective trainers of the saints. The sheep can only learn what the shepherd knows.

The function of the local church is uniquely one of discipleship. One of the most neglected areas of church life is the training of new converts. All new converts are babes in Christ and need spiritual help. If they are nurtured by a systematic, personal program, they may become mature Christians in a relatively short time. In addition, one of the corollary benefits of such a program is the spiritual impact on the person doing the training. The extra study he must undertake in order to teach the convert will draw him closer to the Lord and encourage him. This growth alone would be of inestimable worth to any church.

The results of discipleship, however, are even more pertinent. By the time the new Christian has finished, he should be in a position to teach the same truths to other new babes in Christ. This was Timothy’s privilege under Paul’s guidance: “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:1, 2)

Practically speaking, the local church could make use of a ten-week course. The pastor(s) could assign new converts to members who are trained to do the work of discipleship. It is helpful if the background of the discipler is similar to that of the new believer.

There are minimal basic subjects to be covered in a discipleship program that will build an effective base for future growth:

- Review the plan of salvation, assurance of salvation, and what happens when a person is saved.
- Explain the importance of baptism, church fellowship, the Lord's supper, dedication, spiritual living (the Spirit-controlled life), stewardship, and spiritual gifts.
- Explain the essentials of Christian living including the two natures, temptation, victory, and forgiveness.
- Explain the importance of reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on the Word of God.
- Emphasize the ministry of prayer and the importance of a personal quiet time with the Lord.
- Explain the privilege of witnessing and winning others to Christ.
- Discuss the reasons for Christian separation from the world and unto Christ.
- Start the convert on a study of the doctrines of Scripture and challenge him with the joys of Bible study.

This format suggests sufficient basic training for a new believer. It must be remembered that discipling for salvation and discipling for maturity and reproduction are both integral parts of the Great Commission.

The church exists to evangelize, to edify, and to contend for the faith. Edification is closely connected to evangelism and apologetics since proper edification entails both an encouragement to evangelism and a defense of the faith. Indeed, edification will prompt the assembly to do the work of evangelism. The method of evangelism is not so much the preoccupation of the New Testament as is the message and the motivation. It is strange to discover that the apostles were not nearly as preoccupied with programs of evangelism as churches tend to be today. Evangelism was assumed, and it happened (Acts 2:46–67; 6:7; 9:31; 16:5). Evangelism in the finest New Testament tradition is the vocation of every believer.

Any method that tends to produce a kind of semi-professional class of evangelist (that is, one who by time and inclination takes special courses and learns special methods) argues against total involvement, justifies those who default, and discourages those unable to master a technique. The distinctive feature of the witnesser in the New Testament was his relation to God and to God's people. The twenty-first century church may well be compelled to adopt Biblical principles and methodology as our world becomes more and more antagonistic to Godliness. How much better it would be if our churches would see their ministries from God's perspective in the first place!

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