

# Discipleship and the Church

## *A new way for a new day*

While our Lord was on earth we read of *"His disciples"*. A disciple is one who learns from and follows his master's ways. The 12 disciples had one teacher to disciple them: Jesus on earth. But the early Christians did not have Jesus on earth to teach them.

What they had was a plurality of men: the Lord's chosen apostles. The apostles received the Lord Jesus' continuing revelation of new mysteries from heaven (1Cor.2:7,10,13). They transmitted it orally or in written form, called *"the apostle's doctrine"*. In this way the chosen apostles fulfilled the risen Lord's command to them: *"teach [disciple] all nations ...teaching them to observe all things...I have commanded you"* (Matt. 28:16-20).

But the term "disciple" is never used again in God's Word after Acts 21:16. The written instruction to the Christian church (the epistles) uses in its place terms such as *"brethren"* (family relationship), *"saints"* (holy ones indwelt by the Holy Spirit), *"body"* (a living organism connected to the Head). Now, by definition, our Lord Jesus Christ does what no other discipler of men could or can do! Christ is not merely with us at times teaching us. Christ is in us continually teaching us ("revealing" to us - giving us to understand) *"the deep things of God"* through His Spirit that is given to all believers (1Cor. 2, Eph. 4:20,21). Now we have the whole written Word taught by His Spirit.

### **The New way: the Church in Christ**

Each member of this body has different manifestations of the Spirit. These are called gifts, (1Cor. 12:7). While no one individual possesses all the given gifts, the body as a whole does. No longer is it just one individual that is complete, like Christ or even an apostle. Now it is the body, joined together as one, that is both multi-gifted and complete. This unique group is Christ's living extension. This is *"the church"*.

For this reason the epistles put the emphasis on believers learning by assembling together *"in the church"* (a meeting). There, the different gifts given from the one Head *"come together into one place"* (1Cor. 14). In the New Testament church meeting, when this plurality of gift functions, the results are *"that all may learn"* (1Cor. 14:31). In the Greek this word "learn" comes from the word "disciple" - it is what a disciple is meant to do.

### **The Shortcomings of the Old Way for Today**

We all know how horses were once a great way to make progress in travel. But to ride a horse on a super highway today presents many dangers and would border on insanity.

To view discipleship as mainly one person teaching or mentoring another person (or persons) belonged to a past age before the creation of the Body of Christ. This is not to say that there is never liberty to teach others outside the "four walls" of a church meeting. (See Acts 18:26, 20:20 / Titus 2, etc.). But to fail to view God's design of the New Testament church and its meeting, that uses a functioning plurality as His new and ordained way for *learning*, misses the new body dynamic - and can present the following dangers.

### **Danger 1 – *Man is perceived as a master***

Discipling implies the one teaching is the master. There is only one master (teacher) and He is in heaven; “*all ye are brethren*” says the Lord (Matt. 23:8-10). We read in Acts 20:30 that from among even those who were elders some would speak perverse things to “*draw away disciples after them*”. All true ministry will therefore guide believers to dependence on the Head and to fellowship with His body.

### **Danger 2 – *Bypassing God’s checks and balances***

Individual discipling can unwittingly bypass the accountability God has ordained in His church. A plurality of elders or overseers (who meet the qualifications) with the Holy Spirit's enabling is to shepherd each local church (Acts 20:28). Correcting an erring believer will require the whole assembly when ‘one on one’ was insufficient to succeed (Matt. 18: 15-17/ 1Cor. 5:4). We are not to be accountable to just one person. Serious failings and sins are not to be kept secret or limited to the knowledge or judgment of only one person. The NT church meeting has a plurality of gift that function with accountability. “*Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge*”.

### **Danger 3 – *Bypassing the plurality of gifts and elderly wisdom***

"Discipling" can lock a person into only one person's style and abilities – with its limitations. By God's intention, no one person has all the gifts. “*For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing ...*” (Romans 12:4). Titus 2 teaches that the aged men and women, with their wisdom, experience and godly example, have a great role to play toward the younger ones. To bypass involvement in the body is but a partial diet that will stunt one's growth.

### **Danger 4 – *Bypassing the Lordship of Christ displayed in a church meeting***

We've learned why individual discipling is not the highest form of learning. It is “*in the church*” of God that believers not only learn the word, but they also learn the ways of God. Among other things this includes reverence, order, protocol, respect, and the authority of headship and submission. There is an authority and an experience of the way of the risen Lord that is uniquely demonstrated when in assembly (1Cor. 14:23-37). It is what Psalm 77:13 speaks of: “*Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary*”. A body has only one head and needs authority and wisdom from that Head to function effectively

### **Danger 5 – *Not providing an outlet for interactive growth***

Discipling is learning. But to learn all that there is to be learned we don't just hear words. We also need to do according to what we heard. So for a body to grow and be healthy it not only needs to take in (eat), it must also exercise and give out to others. The NT church meeting is not just a place to sit and receive. It is also a place for the body members to function according to one's heart, gifts and roles for the edification of all (1Cor. 14). The more a person grows from a baby into adulthood, the more that person increasingly develops the ability to give to others, which matures them in life.

When you're involved in the NT church you are involved in the new way of discipleship!