

51. Paul Demonstrated the Process of Biblical Church Development

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children understand that God will give them life until they have completed the purpose that He has for them on this earth. We also saw how quickly people change. That change was shown as the people changed their minds when Paul and Barnabas said that they were not gods and listened to the Jews who came from Antioch and Iconium and then joined those Jews in stoning Paul. That did not stop Paul and Barnabas and the next day they went on to the city of Derbe. In our topic today, we are going to see how to help our children understand the process of Biblical church development.

Each of the major churches in the book of Acts demonstrates five stages of Biblical church development. Understanding this process of Biblical church development and learning how to apply that process in our own lives will help us to understand how to carry out the purpose that God has for us in our own lives. Acts 14:21-23 says, “And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” We will see that these verses give us a summary of the first four stages of Biblical church development.

In the book of Acts, we see that the first stage in the development of every church was the preaching of the Gospel. Unless this stage continues, a church will eventually die, because all of the other stages are built on this foundation. In fact, any time any of the stages are discontinued, that church begins to die. In Acts 11:19-21, we read, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” Here, we see that in Antioch they preached about the Lord Jesus and many believed and turned to the Lord. True churches will never develop unless they are built on the foundation of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. The goal of the first stage is to see people make true decisions for Christ, which includes repentance of sin and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second stage in the development of every church in Acts is explained in the statement that they made many disciples. This involved gathering Christians in groups. The various forms of the word “disciple” are used two hundred and seventy-four times in the New Testament. However, the verb form is used only four times. Those four uses of the verb help us to understand what happens to develop mature disciples during the second stage. The first use of the verb form is in Matthew 13:52 where we read, “Then He said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure *things* new and old.’” Here, the word is translated “instructed”. This verse gives the definition of a mature disciple. He is like the head of a household (a disciple has one or more spiritual children). He had a treasure (a mature disciple knows Christ and knows the Word of God). He is able to bring things out of that treasure (able to teach others). He is able to teach new things (He is continuing to

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Updated July 2023

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learn). He is able to teach things old (He is able to teach the basics of Christianity).

The second place the verb form is used is Matthew 27:57 which says, “Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.” Here, we see that the man who buried Christ had become a disciple. The third use is in Matthew 28:19-20 which says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.’ Amen.” Here, we have one command “Make disciples”. Then, we have three participles that show us how to carry out that command – going, baptizing and teaching. As we are going, we are to make disciples (disciple to Christ); baptizing those who come to true faith in Christ (identification with Christ – Romans 6:3-4); teaching them how to obey all that Christ commanded (disciple to maturity in Christ).

The fourth place the verb form is used is here in Acts 14:21. Putting the four uses of the verb form together we see that the purpose that God has for every Christian is to “Make Disciples”. A mature disciple is defined in Matthew 13:52. A disciple is illustrated in Matthew 27:57. As Christians, we are commissioned to make disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. The making of disciples was continually practiced in the early church – Acts 14:21-23. In the second stage of Biblical church development, we see that the goal is to develop stable Christians.

The third stage of Biblical church development is given in Acts 14:22 and we could call this church beginnings and leadership development. We see that when Paul and Barnabas finished their ministry in Derbe, they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch – the three cities where they had faced great opposition. Verse 22 tells us that their primary focus as they revisited these cities was to help the disciples mature and prepare them for spiritual leadership. This involved three things. First, they were strengthening the disciples. The word translated “strengthening” means *to establish more or make firm in the faith*. Second, they were exhorting them to continue in the faith. The word translated “continue” means *to remain, to hold fast or to abide*. In fact, it is a strengthen form of the word “abide” used in John 15:5 where we read, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” We want to help Christians learn to abide in Christ. This is a key part of the process of qualifying people for spiritual leadership. Third, they were preparing the disciples for much tribulation. Paul had been stoned by people from these cities so they and all future Christians need to expect much persecution.

The fourth stage of Bible church development is given in Acts 14:23. We could call this stage church organization. First, we see that they appointed a team of leaders in every church. Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-12 share how we qualify men for spiritual leadership. In fact, one of the most important ministries of every church planter and then every church leadership team should be the qualifying of additional men for church leadership. Titus 2:3-5 tells how women qualify additional women for leadership among the women. Second, just as the leaders in the church at Antioch did before they sent out Paul and Barnabas, they then spent time in prayer and fasting. Third, they commended these new leaders to the Lord in whom they believed. The word translated

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“commended” means *to place before or to entrust*. Acts 20:32 says, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Paul and Barnabas also entrusted these new leaders to the Lord and expected Him to work through their leadership. We see the fifth stage of Biblical church development when Paul returns to this area in Acts 16:1-5.

Acts 14:24-28 says, “And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.” Here, we see Paul and Barnabas preached the Word as they traveled back toward Antioch, the city from which the Lord had sent them out in Acts 13:1-3.

Antioch was the place where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work to which they were called. The word “commended” means *to deliver, to commit or to give someone for their use*. God had called Paul and Barnabas and the church had prayed and given them to the Lord for the ministry that the Lord had for them. Now, when they returned to the church, they gathered the church together to tell the church what God had done through their ministry. Romans 15:5-6 says, “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind *and* one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, we see that a report of what God has done gives everyone an opportunity to give glory to God for the way that He has worked through the lives of those who have served Him in other places.

Paul and Barnabas also told how the Lord had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Paul later wrote in Romans 15:8-9, “Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises *made* to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for *His* mercy, as it is written: ‘For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name.’” Because of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, Gentiles in many cities could give glory to God for His mercy.

We also want to help our children learn to give glory to God for the opportunity that the Lord gives them to share the Gospel in other places and to become partners together in the ministry of Biblical church development. As they learn to pray that God will give them such a ministry, the Lord will provide open doors wherever they live the rest of their lives to be partners together with the Lord so that more people can place their faith in Christ and give glory to God for His mercy. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand how the Lord can use them in Biblical church development.