



YOUR LIFE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST



GRANT CASTLEBERRY

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INTRODUCTION

What if I told you there was a secret to your spiritual growth that most modern Christians have never figured out? What if I told you there was a catalyst for your growth in grace that, if you fail to utilize it, would keep you from reaching full maturity in your Christian walk? What if I told you that if you did not know this secret, you would never come to a full knowledge of God? What could I possibly be talking about? What's the secret?

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THE BODY PRINCIPLE

Part 1: The Body Principle

The Apostle Paul tells us plainly that the secret is your life in the church! I call it the “body principle.” The principle is as follows: Christ ordained that our highest spiritual growth will happen through our participation in his body, the church. There is no “lone ranger” Christianity. There are no isolated spiritual giants. There are no spiritually mature hermits living in caves. Red Wood trees are found growing together, making up a great Sequoia forest. So it is with giant Christians. Giant Christians grow in community with other giants. This is the essence of christian community, where believers help one another grow into the fullness of Christ.

Christ established that his discipleship hub would be the church. He constructs his spiritual giants — together — through the life of the church. Paul says in Ephesians 4:13–14 that Christ will build up the body of Christ:

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Notice in these verses Paul’s emphasis on “maturity.” He describes the Christian life as a progression in which we grow from spiritual babes in Christ into “mature manhood.” The original word for mature is *teleios* and it means to reach a state of being “perfected” or “fully grown.” It is the idea of growing

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into completeness as fully grown Christian disciples. Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 14:20 when he says, “Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”

Also notice in Ephesians 4:13 how this process takes place. It is “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...” The entire “body” engages in this process of Christian growth together, until “we all attain” maturity. It is God’s design that spiritual maturity comes through life in the church — through worship, teaching, fellowship, and prayer in the church. Or to state it negatively, you will never reach your full growth that God designs for your life outside of the church.

The Quantico of the Christian Life

In order to flesh out this principle more fully, let me take up the subject of training a new Marine officer — something in which I have first-hand experience. In order to train a new Marine officer, the Marine Corps does not send YouTube links so you can learn to march in your driveway. Nor do they send you a pull-up bar so you can practice your pull-ups. Nor will they send a sergeant instructor to your house in order to personally train you. Why? Because it is not an individual exercise.

To become a Marine officer, you must step on a plane and fly to Reagan or Dulles airport, from where you will eventually be transported south to a humid little training depot on the Potomac River called Quantico. It is there you are immersed in a more than one-hundred-year-old Marine tradition of officer training named Marine Corps Officer Candidate School (OCS). Once there, your head will be shaved. You will wake up every morning at four o’clock to strenuous physical training led by a British Royal Marine. And that is just the beginning of your day! Hours of Marine education classes, drill on the parade deck, leadership exercises, and martial arts training follow. This rigor continues for weeks in what seems like an unremitting dream.

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Perhaps the most famous thing about Quantico is a swamp-like creek nearby called “the Quigley.” The water is murky with mud. Often snakes can be seen fleeing from Marines into its shallows. Therefore, in what seemed like Marine irony, thought up by some sadistic sergeant instructor of a bygone age, someone decided that many of the training events should end by swimming, running, or carrying logs through the Quigley!

No one could accomplish the rigors of Marine OCS alone. All of these exercises were completed with the other future Marine officers in my platoon and company. We trained together. We lifted one another up. We looked out for one another. One prior enlisted Marine, who was making the jump to officer, taught me how to make my rack (bed) and clean my rifle to pass inspection. The sight of your buddy fifty yards ahead motivates you to run and swim through the Quigley. As you do your pullups, the future Marine officer in front of you is counting your pullups and encouraging you ahead. We drilled together. We ate together. We went on long marches together. We went on liberty together. Everything was done together — a picture that beautifully mirrors how the christian community grows and thrives. And when we finally graduated from Marine OCS, we marched across the parade deck together. We had together been forged into Marine officers. So it is with our spiritual growth. Christ designed the church to be a spiritual Quantico — the place where spiritual giants are forged together through faithful church ministry and shared discipleship.

The metaphor Paul uses so often in the New Testament is not dissimilar to this one (see Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). As seen earlier, Paul loved to describe the church as a body. Of course this is the metaphor the Lord Jesus taught Paul on the Damascus Road, when he asked him, “Saul why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). The idea troubled Paul. When had he persecuted the Lord Jesus? Jesus equated his followers with himself, as part of his body of christ, and so to persecute his body was to persecute Christ.

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It is this spiritual reality that compels us to grow in grace in a local “body” or “assembly.” Every Christian should strive to train in Christlikeness in a local body, where they will be spurred on to spiritual maturity.

Understanding the Body Principle

To understand this body principle more fully, we must go to the place in Scripture where it is clearly outlined: Ephesians chapter four. In the first sixteen verses of this chapter, the Apostle Paul gives us a robust description of how the church functions in our sanctification. We’ve already seen several verses from this section, but here is the section in its entirety:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...

Step 1: The Right Motivation

Paul begins instructing us with the most basic thing: our attitude. To train properly in the body of Christ, you need the right motivation. Paul defines this motivation in Ephesians 4:1, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...”

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Of course Paul has just finished explaining that salvation is entirely by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8–9). But having received this call to grace unto salvation, we are now to “walk in a manner worthy of this calling.” Walking refers to the overall pattern of our lives. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 5:2, “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” He says in Ephesians 5:15, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.”

We are to “walk worthy” out of a desire to give honor to God for what he has done in bringing salvation to our souls. We are to walk worthy from a heart of gratitude for all he has done for us. Holy conduct is never the result of trying to earn God’s favor, but of having already received God’s favor. Those who have been rescued by grace desire to walk in grace, participating in prayer in the church, joining together in worship in church, and embracing meaningful church membership. The sweet reality of salvation spurs us on to godly living in Christ’s body. That is our motivation. And it is the only motivation.

One question we should ask ourselves at this point is this: If God’s grace and salvation does not motivate us to holy living, then do we actually understand grace? For Paul, the answer is an emphatic “no!” He writes eloquently in the sixth chapter of Romans that no redeemed sinner willfully continues to live a life of habitual sin. “May it never be!” he says (Rom. 6:2). So if we lack the desire to obey Christ, we must return to the very truth of the gospel and surrender to him in faith. That is the only place to begin.

Step 2: The Right Character (Christlikeness)

After understanding our motivation, we must begin to function in the body of Christ with the right character qualities. In other words, we must engage the church with the right virtues. Just as weight lifters enter the gym with a mindset focused on explosiveness, toughness, and endurance, and just as runners enter the race with a mindset focused on

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speed, pace, and perseverance, so the Christian should enter the church focused on the correct virtues — all of which are shaped through prayer in the church and shared life in the community of believers.

Those virtues can be summed up in the word “Christlikeness.” Paul breaks down this Christlikeness into five virtues. He writes, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The virtues are as follows: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and an eagerness to maintain spiritual unity (Eph. 4:2–3). The first two virtues deal with the mindset we must have in regards to ourselves (humility, gentleness). The third and fourth virtues deal with our mindset toward others (patience, forbearance). And the fifth virtue is really a summarizing statement about the general mindset toward the church (maintaining “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”).

The Five Christlike Virtues

Type of Virtue	Virtues in the Church (Christlikeness)	
Mindset toward Ourselves	Humility (Eph. 4:2)	Gentleness (Eph. 4:2)
Mindset toward Others	Patience (Eph. 4:2)	Forbearance (Eph. 4:2)
Mindset toward the Church	Eager to Maintain the Unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3)	

Here are general definitions of the virtues:

Humility – to take the low place; to know who you really are before God; to put others ahead of yourself. Paul uses the same word in Philippians 2:3, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” These virtues are essential for a

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healthy christian community, where believers put the needs of others above their own.

Gentleness – acting in meekness; restraining one’s power; not displaying a domineering spirit but a spirit of kindness. If you have ever had a professor who thought they were a big shot, then they probably treated people in a prideful, domineering way. Gentleness is the exact opposite. It is closely related to humility in that it is a posture of meekness and humility. Ephesians 4:32 could be used as a definition for gentleness: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” This virtue is indispensable in the church community, where believers learn to interact with grace rather than dominance.

Patience – the state of maintaining tranquility under duress. When others do not measure up to our expectations, we must exercise patience. I think of trying to pack our family car for a long trip. Every parent knows the challenges of trying to prepare children for an excursion and the inevitable “duress” that results. But “patience” is the fruit the Holy Spirit produces in our lives (Gal. 5:22). By God’s grace, we can and should remain “tranquil” even when we face difficulties in others.

Bearing with one another in love – similar to patience above, this virtue deals with long-suffering. In a sense it means that we accept someone despite their deficiencies. What enables us to do this? Love! The love of Christ compels us to “bear with one another.” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:7, “[7] Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” One important thing to remember in regard to this is that our Lord bears much from each of us. Each of us deserves to be an outcast. But Christ, in his love and grace accepts us. He bears with us despite our disobedience. So as Christ bears much with us, so we must bear with other believers — a reality shown most clearly when we gather for prayer in the church, carrying one another’s burdens.

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Eager to Maintain the Unity of the Spirit – this is a summarizing virtue that encompasses our life in the church. We are to be vigilant about keeping the unity of the body of christ that the Holy Spirit has created. The Christian is never told in the New Testament to create unity. Rather, the Christian is told to maintain the unity the Holy Spirit has already created. This is a very important distinction to note, because we live in an evangelical world that emphasizes ecumenism, racial reconciliation, and other types of unifying strategies that all fail to understand the biblical principle of spiritual unity. We never create unity. Indeed, we cannot. Rather, the Holy Spirit creates unity, and then we are called to preserve it.

The phrase the Apostle Paul uses to describe this unity is “in the bond of peace.” The word he uses for “bond” is the same word used to describe tendons or sinews in the human body (sundesmos). He uses the same word in Colossians 3:14, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” What Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit has already bound us together in peace and love with other Christians. This bond transcends nationalities, languages, and cultures. It is a spiritual bond. One of the devil’s primary objects is to destroy this bond, which he often does in local congregations. So Paul’s instruction is that we be vigilant in maintaining this spiritual unity and not give the devil a foothold.

Step 3: The Right Unity

In order for each church to function properly, it must be built on the right unity. As if to satisfy our curiosity, Paul then describes its essence. He says,

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6).

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You will notice that Paul lists seven “spiritual unifiers.” The thoughtful Bible student will remember that seven is a number of perfection. It is a divine number. In other words, the unity Paul is describing is a perfect unity. In the original Greek text, Paul does not even use the phrase “There is” at the beginning of verse four. He merely states, “One body, one Spirit...” and so forth. He lists simple declaratives in describing this unity all qualified with the word “one.”

It becomes clear in looking at this perfect unity, that Christ has made us completely “one” in him. One other interesting aspect to note is that the unity is described in aspects of each person of the Godhead. The first three unifiers are brought about by the Holy Spirit (one body, one Spirit, and one hope that belongs to our call). The second three unifiers are brought about by the Son (one Lord, one faith, and one baptism). Finally, the seventh unifier is brought about by the Father (one Father of all, “who is over all and through all and in all”).

The Seven Spiritual Unifiers

Member of the Trinity	Spiritual Unifiers in Ephesians 4:4–6		
God the Holy Spirit	1) One body	2) One Spirit	3) One hope that belongs to our call
God the Son	4) One Lord	5) One faith	6) One baptism
God the Father	7) One God and Father who is over all and in all		

When Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached through Ephesians 4, he did a separate message on each one of these seven unifiers. We do not have that much time to spend on each one of them, but a thorough study on each one is very rich. Here is a shorter summary:

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1) One body – The church is united together in Christ into one spiritual body. This is the heartbeat of Christian community, where believers understand that God has knit them together into one living organism. Paul says in Romans 12:5, “so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” He also says in Colossians 3:15, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.” This is the picture of the church. Christ has knit us together into one living organism in the power of the Spirit — the body of Christ. Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians that we are different members or parts of the body (1 Cor. 12:14), describing this organic unity of the parts in a staggering way:

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

This is the essence of unity in the church — many members, one body, bound together by Christ.

2) One Spirit – Furthermore, every Christian is indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. This means that every Christian has the same spiritual experience of the “new birth” (John 3:5–8). Every Christian has the same interaction with the “divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Every Christian is spiritually cleansed in the soul (Ezek. 36:25). Every Christian produces the same type of spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “We are all made

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to drink of one Spirit.” He says earlier in Ephesians, “that we are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13).

The Christian spiritual life, then, is largely similar for every Christian. Obviously, we all have our unique trials and experiences, but these are all mediated through the same Holy Spirit. Growing up, I would watch the Anne of Green Gables films with my mother. In the films Anne would often refer to her closest friends as “kindred spirits.” The idea being that their friendship was knit together because of their common “spirit” or interests. In Christianity this is even more the case — we have the same Holy Spirit indwelling each of us.

3) One hope that belongs to your call – Every Christian, because of the Holy Spirit’s call in their lives, has their heart set on heaven. Paul says in Ephesians 1:18, “Having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, which are the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints.” This is the hope of the Christian. For this reason every Christian is a cloud gazer, looking to the skies awaiting our Lord’s return. Christ and his eternal kingdom, and not the things of the world, are our ultimate hope (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

4) One Lord – Christians all worship the one Lord and Savior. There was a debate in the evangelical world when I was a young man about whether it is necessary for every Christian to surrender to Jesus as Lord in order to be saved. Some argued that this added a “work” to saving faith. The truth, though, is that the message of the gospel demands a faith that is a surrendering faith, a faith that confesses the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul says in Romans 10:13, “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” When we trust Christ, we do not “make him Lord.” He is Lord, and we simply confess our trust in him.

Therefore, all true Christians confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul says it is a universal principle that, “if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then whether we live or whether we die

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we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8). Practically speaking, this means that Christ owns the life of every Christian. We are "slaves of God" (Rom. 6:22). Therefore, we must ask what the Lord's will is in every situation and seek to pursue it (Rom. 12:2).

5) One faith – Moreover, in Christ Jesus, we are united in a common faith. What Paul means by "one faith" is that we believe the same basic truths. Sometimes these truths are called "first order doctrines." I heard John MacArthur recently call these doctrines the "drivetrain" of the Christian faith. That's a great metaphor. They are the pivotal doctrines that make the Christian life run. This is why "faith" is sometimes referred to as an objective reality that is outside ourselves. For example, Paul said that he preached "the faith" (Gal. 1:23) and that he labored for "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5). Jude says that there is a "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

The early creeds of the church — such as the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed — were written to delineate what these must-believe truths are. This shared confession is a core expression of the body of Christ, shaping our unity as we gather in church fellowship around these essential doctrines. Generally speaking, the doctrines that must be believed are as follows:

- The doctrine of the Trinity. God is one God in three persons. The three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are God (Matt. 28:20).
- The doctrine of creation. God is the creative agent behind all that exists. He created everything, including mankind, in the beginning (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1).
- The doctrine of sin and judgment. The first man, Adam, broke God's law and brought sin upon all mankind (Rom. 5:12). Therefore every person who has ever lived is a sinner (Rom. 3:23). Because of our sin before God, we deserve God's judgment and wrath, which God will bring on the last day (Rom. 6:23; Acts 10:42).

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- The doctrine of Scripture. God has revealed himself through his Word, and he has spoken perfectly through men to do it (2 Pet. 1:21; 2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore the Bible is inerrant and infallible in the original manuscripts.
- The doctrine of Christ. The eternal Son of God took on our humanity and lived a sinless life in order to be our representative (John 1:1–18; Phil. 2:5–11).
- The doctrine of redemption. On the cross, Jesus Christ did not become a sinner, but he took on our sin penalty. In his humanity, he took upon himself the eternal wrath of God for our sins (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:25).
- The doctrine of resurrection. Jesus Christ rose again from the dead three days after his death. He is the “firstfruit” of all those who believe in him, who will follow in his resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15).
- The doctrine of the second coming and eternal state. The Lord Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead, to make all things new, and to establish his eternal kingdom (1 Thess. 4:13–18; Rev. 21, 22).

6) One baptism – Baptism is a symbol that represents the spiritual reality of our union with Christ. We are united to him in his death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism pictures this reality. When we go under the water, it represents our death and crucifixion with Christ (Gal. 2:20). When we come up out of the water, it represents our new life in him (2 Cor. 5:17). For this reason, Jesus commanded that all Christian disciples receive this outward symbol, which represents the reality of our spiritual baptism into him (Matt. 28:19, 20; Rom. 6:4). All Christians receive this same baptism into Christ, which is the initiating sign of the Christian faith.

7) One God and Father who is over all, through all, and in all – Finally, the unity ends with the knowledge of God the Father. There is no higher spiritual experience than knowing God (John 17:3). Christian spirituality ends here with doxology. This is what drives us to worship and gather together (Heb. 10:25). We are enraptured with the beauty of God. We are

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gripped by his transcendent holiness. We find that knowing God is the sweetest existence that man can find on this earth.

As you can see, the unity that God has created in the church is a marvelous unity. It is a unity that demands our participation in the body of Christ, grounding us in a christian community that reflects God's design.

Step 4: The Right Gifts

For our participation in the body of Christ, the Lord has imparted a wonderful thing to us: spiritual gifts. As part of his glorious enthronement in heaven, he showered spiritual gifts to us in his church. Paul says:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men. (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

The picture painted in these verses is of a king coming triumphantly back to his kingdom after a great victory, who then showers his subjects with the great spoils of war. Christ "descended" to the earth in the incarnation, only to "ascend" back into heaven at the end of his ministry as the established messianic king. In so doing he showers "grace," which literally means "a gift" to his people. This grace is not saving grace, but rather "spiritual gifts." The gifts impart spiritual competencies that each of us is to use towards the edification of the whole body. Paul says, "All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually" (1 Cor. 12:12).

Moreover, like a snowflake, every Christian is unique in the spiritual gift or gifts that are received; no two Christians are exactly the same in their spiritual gifting (1 Cor. 12:4). Often, multiple spiritual gifts are given to every believer, and they are given in various degrees. Even those with

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the gift of teaching, for example, are gifted in different ways: some for teaching children, others for teaching college students, and others for teaching seminary students. God essentially crafts each one of us in unique ways with various gifts and proportions of gifts in order to serve. This diversity strengthens the church organization as each member contributes in distinct ways.

I believe that with the closing of the canon of Scripture, the higher gifts of miracles, tongues, and prophecies have ceased (1 Cor. 13:8–10). But the other gifts are still operative in the church today. These would include:

- The gift of service (Rom. 12:7)
- The gift of teaching (Rom. 12:7)
- The gift of exhortation/preaching (Rom. 12:8)
- The gift of generosity/giving (Rom. 12:8)
- The gift of leadership (Rom. 12:8)
- The gift of mercy (Rom. 12:8)
- The gift of wisdom (1 Cor. 12:8)
- The gift of faith (1 Cor. 12:9)
- The gift of discernment (1 Cor. 12:10)

This list is not exhaustive. Nor is any gift list in the New Testament completely exhaustive. There are a variety of gifts, all being given through the same Holy Spirit. The important principle is that you know your spiritual gift(s), and that you then start using them in the body.

Step 5: The Right Leaders

With everyone receiving different spiritual gifts, you would think the church would be very chaotic. I know it might sound silly, but if everyone is a unique snowflake, then it would seem the church would be a blizzard! What is in place to help put the body into order? To help there

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be order and organization in the body, Paul says that Christ also gives leaders to the church. The leaders, through their proclamation of the Word of God, bring order and spiritual dynamism to the body. Paul says in Ephesians 4:11–12, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

As the church grows, these leaders also help cultivate Christian unity, ensuring believers remain anchored in doctrine, love, and shared purpose — something strengthened through regular prayer in the church, which keeps the body sensitive to the Spirit and united in mission.

Paul lists four offices (some argue for five) that God gives to the church. They are the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastor-teachers. Let me briefly define each role:

Apostles — To qualify as an apostle, one must have witnessed the ministry of the Lord Jesus and then have been personally commissioned by him (Acts 1:21–26). The Apostle Paul considered himself the “least among the apostles,” since he had been a distant bystander to the Lord’s ministry, and he was the last to be commissioned of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:9). The apostles were the ones who determined how the church was to function under the name and guidance of Christ (John 14:27). It was to the apostles that our Lord gave the “keys of the kingdom” to establish his New Testament church (Matt. 16:19). Since our Lord has ascended into heaven, no apostles have been commissioned other than Paul. Therefore, when the Apostle John finally died on the island of Patmos, the office of apostle ceased to exist. There are no modern day apostles. Yet we stand on the traditions that they established, given to us through the Word of God.

Prophets — A prophet is someone who spoke the Word of God through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). Before the New Testament canon was complete and circulated, there was a dire need for

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people in every church to receive revelation from God. Therefore, in the early church, God raised up prophets to fill the void. Four of the daughters of Philip were said to prophesy (Acts 21:9). Agabus, the prophet, came and prophesied to Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10–14). Paul recounts that many prophets would give prophecy in the early churches (1 Cor. 14:3). We could consider Mark, Luke, Jude, James, and the writer of Hebrews prophets as well, since they contributed to the New Testament canon, yet were not considered apostles. When the New Testament canon was closed (Rev. 22:18–19), the office of prophet ceased to function in the church. Paul clearly states, “As for prophecies, they will pass away...” (1 Cor. 13:8).

Evangelists – Evangelists were those with a larger-scope ministry. As their name suggests, their responsibility was to herald the gospel, win the lost to Christ, and labor in the establishment of churches. We talk about “church planters” today, but technically a “church planter” would fall under the category of what the New Testament refers to as an “evangelist.” Early evangelists included Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Tertius, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater, and many others. These men were involved in an itinerant evangelistic ministry in order to win souls and build up the churches. Paul specifically tells Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5). Modern day examples would include George Whitefield, D. L. Moody, or Billy Graham. These men were certainly called to preach the gospel, but they were called to preach it on a large scale and build up and revive churches.

Pastor-Teachers – The pastor-teachers are those men who are called to full-time shepherding/teaching ministry in the local church. It is my estimation that all pastor-teachers are elders, but not all elders are gifted as pastor-teachers (see elder requirements in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1). A pastor-teacher is the preacher who is called by God to enter into the full-time teaching ministry of the church. The way the pastor-teacher is recognized is by their preaching and teaching gifts. Remember, it is

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Christ who gives them to the church. These men are faithful to teach “the whole counsel of God” in the local body of Christ and faithful to provide leadership to elders as the first among equals (Acts 20:27). There might be men gifted as “pastor-teachers” who serve underneath the primary pastor-teacher of each church. Oftentimes the Lord is training and preparing these men to eventually be sent out to shepherd and teach as the pastor-teacher of a different congregation.

The New Testament Word-Centered Offices

Office	Time	Location	Function
<i>Apostle</i>	Discontinued	Global church	For the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of churches
<i>Prophet</i>	Discontinued	Local church (primarily)	For the building up of the local church
<i>Evangelist</i>	Continued	Global church	For the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of churches
<i>Pastor-Teacher</i>	Continued	Local church	For the building up of the local church

Step 6: The Right Ministry

With the right leaders in place operating according to their calling, those within the church can serve properly with their respective giftings and ministries. Paul says the leaders “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). The word for ministry is diakonia, the root of which gives us the word deacon. Paul’s point is that everyone is to serve in the ministry of the church. And the ministry is a “construction project,” the

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“building up” of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). Often in modern thinking, ministry is for the pastors and the evangelists. But that is not what Paul says! The pastor-teachers and the evangelists are for the equipping of the saints for their ministries.

I once heard John MacArthur say that Moody Monthly ran an article on Grace Church in the 1970s. The title of the article was “The Church with Eight Hundred Ministers.” The thesis of the article was that nearly every adult member of the church served in an official capacity in the life of the church. Spiritual dynamism gripped the church. The body functioned properly. What followed was incredible growth — not just numerically, but most importantly, in terms of spiritual maturity! When everyone serves, using their spiritual gifts in the life of the body, the body becomes strong.

Step 7: The Right Maturity

Now we have come full circle to where we began. When the body of Christ is functioning in this way, and we are functioning in the body, we grow exponentially spiritually. We take flight. We arrive at that “mature manhood” (Eph. 4:13). We arrive at the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). At this point a spiritual dynamic work has taken place in you that can only take place within the body of Christ. What does this maturity look like?

First, discernment. Discernment is not just knowing truth from error, but truth from half-truths. Paul describes what one outcome of our maturity should be in Ephesians 4:14: “that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Mature Christians stand through the false teachings and “deceitful schemes” that Satan loves to peddle in the church. They withstand theological liberalism, social justice movements, woke ideologies,

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evangelical feminism, and a whole host of perilous teachings that Satan uses to deceive and tear down the church.

Second, being a disciple-maker. Rather than just being taught, maturity means you are able to teach others. You impart sound doctrine and biblical wisdom to less mature Christians. Paul places one important qualifier on this teaching: it is to be done in love. We have all known people who discuss doctrine as a coffee-house debater and not a churchman. They talk about the truth in order to win arguments and not to build up others. Contrary to this mindset, Paul says we must have both truth and love as we make disciples. He says: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

This quality of being a disciple-maker is critical to our own growth. We cannot claim to be mature until we can speak the truth in love to others.

Third, long-term service. We are to be disciplined to serve in the body over a long period of time. Paul says: “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). This deep commitment mirrors the unifying reality represented in one baptism, reminding us that our shared identity in Christ fuels lifelong faithfulness.

The key quality here is to be a “part” that is “working properly.” We must be content to fulfill our role — whatever the Lord has given us to do. And we should strive to fulfill this role for a long time. My grandfather taught a televised Sunday School class at his church for more than forty years. He was faithful, week in and week out, to prepare his lesson and show up to teach the class. He even followed up with those members of the class who were not able to be present each week. After he was diagnosed with leukemia, just months before he died, he continued teaching. It was not until he was placed in hospice care and died about a week later did

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he stop. He literally taught until he physically was unable to do so. That is the picture of spiritual maturity. I told our congregation one time, “You serve as hard as you can, for as long as you can, until God says you’re canned!” When we are carrying out these three disciplines, we know that we have arrived at spiritual maturity.

The Three Marks of Spiritual Maturity

Quality	Definition
<i>Discernment</i>	The mature disciple is able to distinguish truth from half-truths.
<i>Disciple-maker</i>	The mature disciple begins teaching others in love and making other disciples of Jesus Christ.
<i>Disciplined to serve</i>	The mature disciple uses their spiritual gifts in the life of the church until the Lord closes the door to know longer use their spiritual gift.

2

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE BODY

Now that the most important aspect of life in the church is clearly understood, we can now begin to look more specifically at what discipleship in the church should look like. The most basic principle of discipleship is that we are disciples of Christ. Therefore, discipleship is the process of spiritual growth that makes us more like Christ. And the way it happens is by seeing Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory for the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

This truth is absolutely vital. Otherwise we will be duped by so much of the gutter spirituality offered to us in America. Discipleship means becoming like Christ, doing what he did, thinking like he thought. The word disciple (mathetes) literally means a learner. A disciple learns from his master. Therefore, discipleship happens as we encounter Christ, depend upon him for strength, and begin to be formed into his christlike character. As we have seen, this can only truly happen within his body, the church. But how does it happen? What are the practices?

When you study the life of Christ and then the teaching of the apostles, there are five practices that we should take part in within our local church that form and shape us as disciples. They are:

1. the teaching of the Scriptures;
2. prayer;
3. fellowship;
4. worship; and

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5. disciple-making.

If you need an acrostic to help remember it, remember the phrase: Saved People Follow the Worthy Man (Scripture, Prayer, Fellowship, Worship, Making Disciples).

The Scriptures

Teaching the Word of God is paramount because that is where Christ is primarily seen. As we saw earlier, we are to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Perhaps the key verse highlighting the importance of teaching Scripture in the life of the church is found in Colossians. Paul exclaims:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (Col. 1:28–29)

As Christ and his truth is faithfully proclaimed, people see the truth of the gospel on display. They see their own sin and unbelief. They see their need of Christ. They are built up in the hope of his coming kingdom. In a word, they are transformed and grow toward Christian maturity. Paul said that he worked with all the spiritual juice the Holy Spirit would give him towards this end. Proclaiming Christ, warning brothers and sisters, and “teaching with all wisdom,” so that everyone would become mature in Christ. Paul knew that the life transformation occurred as people saw Christ in the Word of God. This is why he was so insistent in the pastoral epistles to focus on the proclamation of the Word of God. For example notice these imperatives:

- “Command and teach these things.” (1 Tim. 4:11)
- “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” (1 Tim. 4:13)
- “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim. 4:16)

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- “Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.” (1 Tim. 5:7)
- “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (1 Tim. 5:17)
- “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” (2 Tim. 1:14)
- “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:2)
- “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15)
- “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16–17)
- “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” (2 Tim. 4:1–2)
- “He [the elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9)
- “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” (Titus 2:1)
- “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” (Titus 2:7–8)

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Clearly, the imperative is for pastors to unleash the Word of God in their congregations. Pastors are called to wade into the deep waters of the Word, to take their congregations to places where they have never been before — to the gate of Heaven itself. The Word of God should flow forth in every activity of the church. Every meeting, gathering, class, and occasion should ring forth with the Holy Scriptures. So it becomes not just the pastor-teachers, but everyone speaking the Word of God to one another. Only when this happens will the church ministry begin to make actual Christlike disciples.

Prayer

Fueling all this is the corporate life of prayer. It is not an accident that in Acts 6, the apostles said, “We will not wait tables, but rather will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Prayer must always accompany the ministry of the Word. It is the jet fuel of the church’s ministry.

When a small revival happened at Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s church in Aberavon, Wales, Lloyd-Jones attributed the revival to the church’s prayer meetings. The meetings were held, introduced by the pastor, but then open to every church member who desired to pray. The prayers were focused on the advance of the kingdom and the Word of God. They pleaded for conversions and for the Word of God to bear fruit in their lives. The fruit of this is that God the Holy Spirit—who unites us as one body one spirit—began to move in the prayer meetings. Then the regular services were felt to contain even more power. Similarly, the 1857 New York revival began when some businessmen in New York simply began praying and fervently asking God to move in America. In answer to their prayers, God unleashed one of the mightiest revivals that has ever occurred on American soil.

Prayer expresses humility before God. It is an admission that we are not good enough on our own to pull off the ministry. We need the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish anything in the ministry (1 Cor. 3:6). It is also communion with God. When a church spends an inordinate amount of time in prayer, it demonstrates that they are indeed a God-centered church.

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Fellowship

Anthony was a man who lived in Egypt during the period of the early church who desired a deeper communion with God. He felt like the world played far too much of an influence in his life. So in order to practice what he thought was a higher form of Christianity, he renounced his belongings and his regular Christian experience to go live the life of a spiritual hermit in the desert. He lived on only bread and water and almost entirely in seclusion from other people. He became the leader of what later came to be called the desert fathers. When you contrast this with the life of Christ and the exhortations that we saw Paul give earlier to the Ephesians, we see clearly that it is out of step with biblical instruction. For this reason it was right for John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and then Martin Luther and the Reformers to renounce monasticism. The Christian life must be lived in the “fellowship” (*koinonia*) of the body.

Paul told the Romans, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom. 1:11–12). Paul knew that even he, the great apostle, needed the encouragement of these believers. It is then that Christ’s body begins ministering to us, providing nourishment.

One other element that we must say about fellowship is that, for it to be a biblical fellowship, it must be based on truth. There is a reason why in Acts 2:42 Luke records, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship...” It is the doctrine which creates the true fellowship. The fellowship is not just people who share the same interests, rather it is people united in the truth, from various different backgrounds, who then mutually encourage one another.

This commitment to truth also shapes every expression of church ministry, ensuring that fellowship is rooted in Scripture rather than personal preference.

Worship

Jesus told the woman at the well that, “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,

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for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23, 24).

The word Jesus uses for "worship" is proskuneo. It literally means to fall on your face, an expression that points to a bowing of the heart before God. Jesus is saying we are to revere God as we worship him. This is to be done in spirit, meaning from our hearts. It is not to be merely external but to flow from the depths of our being. Jesus said, "Love the LORD with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Mark 12:30). This worship is also to be done in the truth. We are to worship God as he really is, not who we want him to be.

Furthermore, the worship must be centered on the Word of God. There are five elements listed in the New Testament that are to make up Word-centered worship. They are:

1. Reading the Word of God (1 Tim. 4:13)
2. Praying the Word of God (Acts 2:42)
3. Singing the Word of God (Eph. 5:19)
4. Preaching the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2)
5. *Seeing the Word of God (the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper) (1 Cor. 11:17–34)

For the reason of spiritual accountability and true fellowship in the Word of God, the ordinances should only be practiced in the life of the church. They should not be taken in small groups or by para-church ministries, for none of these constitute the church.

Making Disciples

I once heard pastor Tommy Nelson say, "We are to be stallions, not mules!" If you have been around a farm long enough, the analogy will quickly set in. Mules work hard, but they never reproduce. Stallions, on the other hand, produce offspring! This is God's design for each of us in the body (Matt. 28:18-20). Dawson Trotman, the founder of The Navigators, used to ask people, "Who are your spiritual children? Have you replicated yourself?" It's a fantastic and often convicting question.

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Yet it is the imperative the Lord gives each of us. It is the imperative Paul gave to Timothy:

and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim. 2:2)

We are to entrust what we have learned about following Christ to another generation of disciples. We are to replicate ourselves. We are to be stallions, not mules. This desire to win people to Christ and then to “teach them to observe all that Christ commanded” should set a fire in our hearts. Paul expressed it this way: “I have become all things to all people that I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). William Chalmers Burns followed Robert Murray M’Cheyne as pastor of Kilsyth in Scotland. God used Burns to lead a revival in Scotland in 1839. Yet he yearned to make more disciples. He said:

“I am ready to burn out for God. I am ready to endure any hardship, if by any means I might save some. The longing of my heart is to make known my glorious Redeemer to those who have never heard.”

He eventually made his way to China to serve as a missionary. And he became the spiritual father of Hudson Taylor, the man who pioneered the missionary enterprise in China. Like Burns, our hearts must burn to make disciples through evangelism and teaching the Word of God.

Small Group Discipleship

We should be engaged in the Scriptures, prayer, fellowship, worship, and making disciples within the life of our entire church. But sometimes it is helpful to dial these elements (Scriptures, prayer, fellowship, worship, and disciple making) down into a smaller group while maintaining the practices in the larger church. It is helpful for churches to facilitate different types of discipleship programs for believers in various stages of growth and maturity. This should be done as part of the life of the church, with people in your local church. Discipleship groups that are not based in the local church lose the “body principle” we outlined earlier. Without the dynamism of the body and the corporate aspect of discipleship outlined above, a smaller discipleship group will always exist in the shadows. It can never plunge you into the depths because it is outside the body.

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For this reason, I only disciple men who are engaged in my local church body and actively involved in the church's corporate life. This is also where healthy church ministry most clearly shapes how discipleship functions, yet one-on-one or small group discipleship yields great results within the life of the church. The key is to set a time limit (three weeks, three months, one year, etc.) and then outline how those in the discipleship group will be trained. What Scriptures will be studied and how will those in the group be trained to be disciple-makers? This type of teaching and training becomes an invaluable part of every church's disciple-making process. We must always be asking how we can press people further in their spiritual maturity, and often a discipleship group is an excellent way to do this. I must also add that this culture creates organic discipleship. Organic discipleship takes place when people start using these principles on auto-pilot. They evangelize and teach others and form Bible studies and go to the prisons without a formalized discipleship program. In other words, they do not need the church to officially organize it. Rather, they are self-starters within the church. By focusing on corporate discipleship and then engaging in small-group discipleship, disciple-making becomes the DNA of the church's culture.



APPENDIX: WHAT TYPE OF CHURCH?

One of the great questions I often receive as a pastor is, “How do I find a biblical church?” It is true that in order to be involved in the life of the church in the way we have outlined, you must be careful to join the right church. I would rather drive an hour and twenty minutes to get to a good, strong church than languish for years in a weak, dying, or dead church. You should desire to find a church with similar convictions to this field guide. For our church, Capital Community Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, I outlined twelve pillars that define who we are. I humbly put them before you as examples of important qualities to think about as you seek a biblical church in which to invest your life and participate in faithful church ministry. Here they are:

1. **God-centered** – Our desire and central focus is to see God honored and glorified in our church, in our families, and in the life of each believer. We want to live “Coram Deo” — before the face of God.
2. **Plurality of Elders** – God’s design for the church’s governance is that each local church should be led and shepherded by a plurality of godly men who serve in the office of elder.
3. **Sound Doctrine** – Sound doctrine serves as the center of gravity of Christ’s true church. It begins with the gospel, but it also includes teaching the full counsel of God.
4. **Biblical Worship** – We desire to worship God “in spirit and in truth,” as prescribed in his Word.
5. **Spirit-Filled Fellowship** – Our Spirit-filled fellowship is the shared spiritual experience of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and then believing the same gospel. We seek to preserve this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

6. **Expository Preaching** – We are committed to the sequential and expository method of teaching the Bible in which we understand the doctrinal truths about God, ourselves, and our redemption in Christ and apply them to our daily lives.
7. **Necessity of Holiness** – Christ calls every believer in his church to live a life of personal holiness out of a heart of gratitude to God for salvation. If Christ's church is to be holy, that must be reflected in the lives of its members.
8. **God-designed Families** – Strong, biblical families are the foundation of both the church and culture. So we equip Christian husbands, wives, and children to honor the Lord in establishing strong Christian families.
9. **Intercessory Prayer** – We are absolutely dependent on the Spirit of God in intercessory prayer for the advance of all the kingdom work of the church.
10. **Evangelistic and Missional Zeal** – Every believer should be zealous and actively involved in the advance of the gospel in our communities and among the nations.
11. **Discipleship Training** – Every Christian disciple should know certain doctrines and be equipped to do certain things in ministry. Our desire is to train and “present everyone mature in Christ.”
12. **The Semper Reformanda Principle** – This phrase, meaning “always reforming,” is definitional of our church. It means we must always be seeking to be more conformed to the Word of God as a church. We must always be pressing forward in the advance of the kingdom of God and not rest on our past ministry successes.

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