

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 6: COMMUNAL DISCIPLINES



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Communal Disciplines

Communal Disciplines
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Communal Disciplines

Welcome to *Communal Disciplines*

Welcome to *Communal Disciplines*, part 6 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Part of the work we've been given to do as followers of Christ is that of building His Church. We need to work hard at this, as Paul explains, and this involves mastering the disciplines necessary for helping our churches grow in unity and maturity as Kingdom signs and outposts.

Communal Disciplines examines those practices believers take up together in local churches to help each member grow and improve his or her walk with and work for the Lord, and to help the church as a whole become the Body of Christ He intends.

ReVision studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Let the lesson sink into your soul as you consider how to apply its teaching to your life.

Don't neglect to take each day's *Next steps*. This will greatly help you to learn the point of each lesson.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. At the end of each study questions for discussion allow you to pull your learning together so you can make this study more a part of your daily walk with and work for the Lord.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview. Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to see the many other *ReVision* studies, and other resources, available to you at no charge.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

Realizing the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God!

1 A Body Together

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling... Ephesians 4.1-4

One and many

The Christian life is not a solitary endeavor. Each believer has been called to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12), and for each of us, this calling will take a particular form, within a network of relationships, roles, and responsibilities. But we do not undertake this calling alone. We are members of a larger Body – the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ – and we may only expect to realize the full promise of our *individual* callings within that larger, communal setting.

All believers belong to the Body of Christ and are empowered by the Spirit of Christ to contribute to the particular body of which they are members (1 Cor. 12.7-11). The local church is the incarnation of Jesus in its community, and its mission is to “Good News” the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God by words and deeds, both as individuals and as a body together. This was the mission for which Jesus was sent into the world, and it is the mission for which He has sent us as well (Jn. 20.21).

There is one Body, Paul reminds us, to which all the many followers of Christ belong as members together. That one Body is manifested in the world in many local bodies – the particular churches with which we are familiar in communities everywhere. We neglect our duty as followers of Christ, and we will fail to obtain the fullness which is ours in Him, if we do not take seriously our *communal* calling and obligations.

Unity of the Spirit

Each believer must pursue his or her own calling in a worthy manner, taking up the spiritual, relational, and vocational disciplines that enable us to know, enjoy, and glorify God as we seek His Kingdom and righteousness. But we must also be mindful of the fact that, as believers, we are members of one another. And this is particularly and pointedly so in local settings, where communities of believers constitute, after a certain manner, the manifestation together of the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.

In Christ, and by His Spirit, we possess a certain unity with other believers, beginning in our local communities, and, in particular, in the church where we identify as members. The unity we have in the Spirit is a *spiritual* unity, giving us a common outlook, vision, hope, and power, and providing certain shared resources whereby we stimulate, encourage, equip, and assist one another in words and works to proclaim the Kingdom of God to the world.

This unity is first of all a bond of *peace*. In the Body of Christ each of us is at peace with God (Rom. 5.1) and, through Him, within ourselves, the outward circumstances of our lives notwithstanding (Phil. 4.6, 7). This peace which we possess as individuals flows out toward our fellow believers as a bond of hope, confidence, self-denial, and love. It is a primary manifestation of the indwelling Spirit of Christ (Gal. 5.22, 23). This bond of peace allows us to know, trust, and enjoy one another; learn from and share with one another; join together in a synergy of gifts and resources; and exalt our Lord together in worship and witness, all in ways greater than we as individuals could do alone.

The bond of peace we share and express within the Body of Christ provides a platform for bringing the peace of Christ and His Kingdom to the larger community of which we are a part.

The unity of the Spirit, which produces this bond of peace, is thus an important fruit of and contributor to

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our own growth in Christ and the calling He has appointed for each of us. Where this unity of the Spirit and bond of peace are weak or lacking, Christians will struggle to realize the full presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God. So we must take seriously our calling to follow Jesus, and the implications of that calling for His peace within our communities.

Hard work

Paul says we must “work hard” at maintaining this aspect of our calling. That’s the true sense of the word translated in our text as “endeavoring.” Achieving and maintaining the oneness we have in Christ is hard work, and there are many obstacles and hindrances which must be overcome. Moreover, like all work, there must be certain disciplines which, the more we master and employ them, the greater will be the results of spiritual unity and peace within the Body of which we are a part.

If such community-building disciplines exist, it is the duty of all who pursue their calling within the framework of the Body of Christ to discover, learn, and employ those disciplines with all spiritual vigor.

And, indeed, the Scriptures indicate that forging disparate members together into a visible Body of Christ requires that we share in certain activities which, as we do them, enables us to establish and proclaim the reality of Christ’s resurrection to the watching world. So it’s important that we understand and practice well the *communal* disciplines of Scripture. For only thus will be able to realize, maintain, and expand the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace within, among, and through our local churches.

For reflection

1. As you understand it, what is the “unity of the Spirit” which God intends for us in His churches?
2. Why do we have to “work hard” to “maintain” this unity? How do you contribute to this unity?
3. How does God intend His peace to work in my and my church?

Next steps: What are some of the obstacles that continually threaten the peace we know and enjoy within the Body of Christ? Talk with a church leader or Christian friend about this question. What is your responsibility in seeking to overcome such obstacles?

Prayer:

2 Praying Together

And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said:

'Why did the nations rage,

And the people plot vain things?

The kings of the earth took their stand,

And the rulers were gathered together

Against the Lord and against His Christ.'" Acts 4.23-26

Begin here

The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ began in a prayer meeting. For 10 uncertain days, 120 people waited on the Lord, agreeing together and joining their voices for the Lord to pour out His promised Spirit (Acts 1.12-14). Prayer is not everything they did, but everything they did took shape in, launched from, and was sustained by corporate prayer.

When Jesus commanded the apostles to "wait" for God's promise, they understood that to mean they should pray.

Could these anxious and expectant saints have prayed just as well at home, on their own? Perhaps. But it pleased God to bring them together, where their focus was sharpened, their faith strengthened, and their prayers more consistently addressed to the promises and will of God.

Not only was the Church born in prayer, but it persevered through its first great crisis in the same way. When Peter and John were threatened with punishment if they did not cease preaching the Gospel, they returned to their fellowship, now several thousand people strong, and made their report. Whereupon, spontaneously, the people united their voices together and sought the Lord in prayer. Their prayer reminded them that God was not unfamiliar with their trial, and that He was able to sustain and empower them to continue faithful in their calling as the new Kingdom community of the Lord, in spite of the threats of their enemies.

God heard their prayer and emboldened them to persevere, and He continued to grow His Church as a result (Acts 4.31).

And the first great missions effort of the Church was inaugurated during a season of corporate prayer (Acts 13.1-3).

As the community of God's people, called to embody His resurrection life to the watching world, we must not minimize or bypass the importance of praying together.

However...

Yet is this not precisely what we do? How much time do churches spend in corporate prayer? The first believers persisted for 10 days; we hardly give 10 minutes to this important communal discipline. They met every challenge and opportunity in seasons of corporate prayer. Do we do the same? Since prayer is so important to the spiritual life of each Christian, we can only believe that *corporate* prayer, praying *together*, must be equally important in the work of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

But in reality we provide very little – if any – time for corporate prayer in our services of worship, and most churches have given up trying to maintain a weekly prayer meeting. So few people attend, and, in general, the prayers are so small that few believe "prayer meeting" to be an important part of the life of the local church. Groups throughout the church may include prayer in their meetings or activities, but the complaints are

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universal about the trivial matters which tend to command the focus of such prayers, and most people are merely auditors while the “usual suspects” take up the bulk of the group’s prayer time.

And as for all the Christians in any particular community – members of all the local churches – joining together for prayer, such an event is almost unheard of in our day.

We simply do not believe that corporate prayer is an essential discipline for building the Body of Christ and realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom. So how might we begin to rectify this sad situation? Allow me to make a few suggestions.

Some suggestions

First, churches should bring meaningful and extended corporate prayer back to their times of worship. Use a psalm or two to organize that part of the liturgy, as our forebears did in Acts 4. It’s not necessary for everyone to pray, but the *opportunity* to pray should be extended to all, and all should be able to participate in the prayer if only by verbalizing an occasional “Amen” or “Yes, Lord” (1 Cor. 14.16). As we shall see, the entire service of worship is itself a form of prayer, but it can only be engaged as such when worship is rightly ordered and everyone understands the pattern and flow.

Second, give prayer a more prominent role in all other areas of the life of the church. Devote time for praying together in all meetings, Bible studies, and ministry activities, and provide a common focus for such prayers – perhaps, again, by using a psalm – that allows people to focus and intercede together according to a shared agenda.

Third, conduct special meetings where prayer is *the* item on the agenda – a weekly prayer meeting, regular times to pray for revival, joint meetings for prayer with other congregations, and so forth. Kingdom power awaits us as we unite our voices in prayer, especially when we are using God’s own words to guide our prayers. As we work hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, let us recover the central role of prayer in all matters of our community life. For without prayer – focused, sustained, urgent, *corporate* prayer – we will not be able to fulfill our callings, whether as individual believers or bodies together.

For reflection

1. How does praying together with other believers strengthen the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
2. Do you find that praying together is an important part of the life of your church? Why or why not?
3. Do you think it would make any difference in your community if all the Christians in your community, from all Bible-believing churches, gathered regularly to pray together? Explain.

Next steps: Talk with a pastor or church leader about corporate prayer. How do they understand its role in your church? Do they agree that more effort should be invested in praying together? Do they have any ideas about how to accomplish this?

Prayer:

3 Worshipping Together

Let all things be done decently and in order. 1 Corinthians 14:40

The main event

The primary purpose of the Church is to *worship* God and to *promote* worship of God throughout the world.

Now such an idea may not line up well with your understanding of church. Of course, churches sponsor services of worship on a weekly basis. But churches do a lot of other things as well, and many of them take more time and require more of those who participate than a service of worship typically does. Worship undoubtedly is important in our churches, but do we really believe that worship is the *most* important thing our church does?

I mean, what about missions? Or caring for the poor? Or teaching children? Or any of the many other things churches do? Is worship really more important than these?

It is. Because in worship, true worship, we who are the Body of Christ are lifted up above our mundane existence into the very presence of Christ, there to participate in Him and be renewed and transformed in Him, so that His mission through us might go forward in the world.

But if worship is going to play the role God intends within His communities, we need to make sure we understand the work of worship and that we engage that work as a communal discipline according to God's design and pattern.

A pattern for worship

I mentioned two things that may be new ideas to some of us. First, the idea that worship is *work*. That's certainly not a new idea in the larger scheme of Church history. For most of the past 2,000 years or so, believers have understood that worship is a work that we offer to God – a spiritual work, to be sure, but a work nonetheless. Worship requires the application of spiritual force through spiritual means to spiritual ends. The spiritual end is the glory of God, expressed in and through worship and the lives of worshipers. The spiritual means are the various elements and forms of worship, together with the order in which we engage them. And the spiritual force is the Spirit of God working with His Word. We are worshiping God truly when we are working together according to this basic “work order.”

Second, I mentioned that there is a *pattern* for worship – a template, protocol, regimen which, when rightly followed, allows the work we're doing in worship to accomplish the end we seek. Worship, in other words, is not merely whatever we decide to do on any given Sunday morning. Worship consists of certain *forms*, arranged according to a proper *order* or *flow*, so as to engage God's people, by His Word and Spirit, with God the Father through God the Son. Incomplete worship lacks one or more of the forms God prescribes in His Word. Disjointed worship flows in a way that doesn't make sense according to the divine purpose of worship. When our services of worship are incomplete or disjointed, our worship falls short of what God expects and what we require.

Moreover, worship has a proper *focus* and realizes a particular kind of *freedom* in which worshipers are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and bring forth *fruit* pleasing to Him. The focus of worship is Jesus Christ, as we see clearly throughout the book of Revelation and elsewhere. Worship should be directed to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. Our worship should review all the work of Christ and call upon His intercession to make our worship acceptable to God. Further, in the ministry of the Word and sacraments we actually *participate* in Jesus Christ, exalted in glory, and thus fulfill the purpose of worship by

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experiencing our lives together, hidden in God with Christ (Col. 3.3).

When we worship this way we are set free from mere self-interest and the distractions of the world, the flesh, and the devil. We experience being hidden with Christ in God and we are lifted, as it were, out of our merely mundane existence, beyond the veil, and into the very throne room of God, where we have been seated with Christ in glory (Eph. 2.6). We are free to grow, free to be transformed, free to love God in worship in ways that it can be difficult to achieve or sustain during our everyday lives. But the freedom we experience in worship brings forth in us the fruit of Christ-likeness, so that our worship continues *in Him* as a fruit-bearing experience in all areas of our lives (Rom. 12.1, 2).

Worship from the heart

The worship God seeks from His people is above all an inward manifestation of their gratitude to and trust in Him (cf. Ps. 50). In our worship we can have all the right *forms* and organize them according to a proper *flow* of worship. We can even keep our *focus* on the Lord, where it ought to be, and feel as though our worship of God is as complete, full, and joyous as we might hope. But if our hearts are not in it – if we harbor sin in our hearts or are more concerned to gratify our own needs than to exalt the Lord, if we do not worship *out* of a heart of gratitude *unto* a life of obedience and fruitfulness, then we can expect God to reject our worship and visit us with His displeasure.

Worship comes naturally to us. As the image-bearers of God, we are always seeking something greater than ourselves to desire, adore, possess, and extol (Rom. 1.18-23). But although worship comes naturally to us, *proper* worship – worship in line with the divine pattern – does not. We must learn to worship the Lord, and this is a labor of the entire community of God's people.

In our churches we must insist on worship that fits the divine pattern, revealed in His Word; and we must look to our pastors and teachers to instruct us in the pattern of sound worship, even in the midst of worship, as we come before the Lord together. Worshiping God together is the primary purpose of the local church, but only if our worship is according to the pattern God describes will we have the assurance that this communal discipline, this labor we undertake together is not in vain (1 Cor. 15.58).

For reflection

1. How would you describe the “pattern” that guides the worship of your church?
2. How would you describe your experience of worship? Is it like being lifted into the presence of God, surrounded by and suffused with Him, being transformed in Christ-likeness?
3. How confident are you that the worship at your church is neither incomplete nor disjointed?

Next steps: How confident are you that the worship of your church follows the pattern of sound worship revealed in Scripture? Ask a pastor or church leader to explain why your church worships the way it does.

Prayer:

4 Ministering Together

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... 1 Corinthians 12.7

The purpose of discipleship

Every believer in Jesus Christ is a disciple. Moreover, we are not free to define the terms of our discipleship. The Lord Jesus has done that, and He has told us precisely what He is looking for from those who follow Him: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain...” (Jn. 15.16). In order to ensure that His disciples will bear fruit, He gathers them together into local bodies where, as they unite in prayer and worship, their minds become fixed on Christ and His Kingdom, their hearts grow in love for Him and the desire to serve Him, and their values become reorganized according to their Kingdom and glory callings from the Lord (1 Thess. 2.12).

But bearing fruit is not an automatic consequence of communal prayer and worship. In order for disciples to realize their purpose as followers of Christ, they must be equipped to serve Him, sent to serve Him, and faithful to serve Him in the many and varied ways a body and its members are capable of performing. Pastors and teachers are responsible to equip church members to do those works of ministry that manifest the resurrection life of Christ, advance His rule on earth, and build up His Body in unity and maturity in the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16).

All disciples of the Lord have the Spirit of the Lord dwelling in them. He has given gifts to every member of the Body of Christ, gifts which are to be identified, developed, and put to work for the increase of the entire Body of Christ. Unless all disciples are being equipped for ministry and are using their gifts to serve others, the growth of the local church will be hindered.

Believers are called to minister together *as they are going* in their everyday lives so as to “Good News” the Kingdom of God throughout the larger community.

A misunderstanding

The explanation of ministry which I’ve just outlined may not line up with your understanding of that term. I have frequently asked church members to tell me about their ministry. Typically, they reply by relating the particular church program in which they’re involved, or by excusing themselves from “ministry” because they’re too busy, live too far away from the church, or just have not found the right program to join.

The present mindset among perhaps most church members is that *ministry* is what the “church” does for them. “Ministry” consists of programs, events, and activities, sponsored by the leadership of church, and typically *at* the church facility, where members come to learn, have fellowship, or unite in some good work. Ministry is understood in terms of programs conducted on behalf of church members in order to help them, in one way or another, to know a fuller experience of discipleship.

Do I need to point out that no Biblical basis exists for such a view of “ministry”?

In Biblical terms, *ministry* or “works of service”, is what disciples do *as they are going* about in the daily routines and duties of their Personal Mission Field. Ministry is the calling of every disciple, every waking moment, and requires a rich life of *spiritual disciplines* together with increasing mastery of *relational* and *vocational* disciplines in order for us to make the most of the time God allots to us for glorifying Him in all things (Eph. 5.15-17; 1 Cor. 10.31). All believers – all disciples of Christ – are *ministers* in His Kingdom, living and serving for His glory according to the needs and opportunities that arise before them.

Goal, means, power

Believers in local churches are charged with the responsibility of encouraging one another in good works of

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ministry (Heb. 10.24). All believers have gifts from the Spirit (1 Cor. 12.7-11). All disciples have been sent into their own Personal Mission Field to bring near the Kingdom of God, just as Jesus did (Jn. 20.21). Every disciple, therefore, is responsible to identify, develop, and put to work the gifts God has provided, in the normal course of everyday life, for the purpose of making disciples and building-up the local church (Matt. 28.18-20; Eph. 4.11-16).

The goal of our discipleship does not end in how we feel about, or how satisfied we are, with our relationship with the Lord, the church of which we're members, or the situation and condition of our own lives. The goal of discipleship is *more* disciples, *growing* disciples, united together in *healthy, growing churches*. And every believer must take up this calling according to his unique circumstances, burdens, gifts, and opportunities.

The purpose of discipleship is ministry. The goal of discipleship is more disciples and healthy, growing churches. The means whereby this is accomplished is through communities of believers working together as bodies to show the love of Christ to one another and the people in their communities (Gal. 6.1-10).

Jesus has promised that together the members of His Body will do greater works even than He did (Jn. 14.12), because by His ascending into heaven and sending His Spirit into His Church, He has provided us with indwelling power to make us willing and able to do exceeding abundantly more than we could ever ask or think for the Kingdom and glory of God (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20; 1 Thess. 2.12).

Faithful disciples – *true* disciples – are people of ministry. And as they minister together, to one another and the people in the larger community, the refreshing, life-giving water of spiritual life flows through them, advancing the Kingdom and glory of God (Jn. 7.37-39).

For reflection

1. How would you describe the idea of “ministry” practiced in your church?
2. Meditate on Matthew 28.18-20. What does “as you are going” mean in your life?
3. “Faithful disciples – *true* disciples – are people of ministry.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Next steps: In what areas of getting organized could you use some help? Ask a believing friend, church leader, or pastor to advise you on the best ways to improve your organizational skills.

Prayer:

5 Sharing Together

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. Acts 4.32

Fellowship?

Most churches have a “fellowship hall” or offer opportunities for “fellowship” with other church members. Typically, these times of “fellowship” are intended to be casual opportunities for friendly interaction where church members can enjoy some light refreshment, share their stories with one another, become better acquainted with the members of their church, and bring friends from beyond the church to introduce them to other believers.

In Scripture, such opportunities are not called “fellowship.” They’re more like what the Scriptures have in mind under the rubric of “hospitality.” It’s interesting that, in churches that stress “fellowship” and provide opportunities for “fellowship,” the practice of “hospitality” – of opening one’s home and life to others – tends to decline. We’re happy to engage in “fellowship” with others at church, but we don’t like people invading the cocoon of our private lives.

So by misnaming what many churches offer as a primary focus of their “ministry”, not only do we reduce the practice of true hospitality, but we obscure the meaning and downplay the practice of fellowship. Fellowship, as understood in the Scripture, is a primary characteristic of local churches. But if fellowship is not properly understood, we can not expect it to be properly practiced. Nor can we expect the fruit of fellowship to be what God intends as a means of advancing His Kingdom and glory.

What is fellowship?

The New Testament word for “fellowship” means roughly, “having things in common.” Among the first Christians this took the form of sharing of their time, homes, other possessions, and wealth for the purpose of encouraging others in their discipleship and building-up the local community of believers according to a wide variety of needs.

Fellowship, as we see it in the book of Acts, makes three requirements of us that are not commonly found in many local churches today. First, fellowship requires *renunciation* – that disciples make up their minds that, not only are *they* not their own, but belong to God through Jesus Christ, but *nothing they possess* belongs to them, either (cf. 1 Cor. 6.19, 20; Acts 2.43, 44; 4.32). They are stewards of resources, entrusted to them by God, which are to be used to show neighbor-love as often as is required.

For the first Christians fellowship meant, second, a *readiness* to share homes, possessions, and wealth with their fellow believers, as well as with congregations in need elsewhere. This included making provision to meet the needs of those in their membership who struggled or were unable to provide for themselves – such as widows, the sick, and the poor. The first Christians understood that you can’t have a true body unless all the members invest the totality of their strength in providing for the wellbeing of all the other members, and that meant bringing of their resources, as need indicated, freely and abundantly.

Finally, for such fellowship to exist, the first Christians had to *resist* every selfish inclination and submit to the wisdom of church leaders as they, wise shepherds, worked to ensure the wellbeing of all members of the local congregation.

The power of fellowship

Most churches today have a deacons’ fund to provide for at least some of the immediate material needs of

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church members and others in the community. Other churches offer other services for the poor or needy – transportation, food vouchers, automobile repair, and so forth. These useful works of ministry are the lingering echo of true fellowship which the first Christians practiced so lavishly and conspicuously. And they continue to bear witness to the *power* of fellowship to “Good News” the Kingdom within our communities.

In Acts 6.1-7 we see the power fellowship can bring to bear within and through a community of believers. A situation arose in which certain destitute widows, who were being cared for by the church in Jerusalem, began to be neglected. Soon this oversight became habitual, and some members began to complain. These widows were not native Jerusalemites but had come to the church there from Gentile regions and spoke mainly Greek, rather than Aramaic, which was the lingua franca of Jerusalem’s Jewish community.

We can imagine that communications with non-Aramaic church members could be difficult. They didn’t speak our language, had different customs and dress, and stood out as not exactly like the rest of us. Overlooking them once or twice could be excused at first, but then overlooking became neglect, and neglect led to grumbling, threatening to fracture the Body of Christ and – at least as outsiders and onlookers must have seen it – put to lie the claim that a new Kingdom and way of life had come among the followers of Christ.

As it turned out, the situation was simply and amicably resolved. The apostles diagnosed the situation and arranged for servants to be appointed from within the community to address the need, and all the members of the community chipped in to do their part in the spirit of true fellowship. The church was strengthened, and the witness of their selfless love to the surrounding community was astonishing. So much so, that even many of those who had staunchly resisted the Gospel, and had even persecuted those who preached it, now became convinced of the reality of the Kingdom and gave their lives to Christ.

When we learn to practice true fellowship in our churches, so that self-denying, need-meeting, conspicuous love for one another overflows into our communities, then the power of that fellowship will pave the way for the proclamation of the Kingdom to onlookers and outsiders of all kinds.

For reflection

1. Why is fellowship, as T. M. explains it here, important for maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
2. How would you describe the state of *renunciation, readiness, and resisting* in your church?
3. How does the fellowship a church practices relate to its mission in the community?

Next steps: In what ways does your church practice fellowship? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question.

Prayer:

6 Mission Together

So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." John 20.21

The mission of Jesus

The word "mission" comes from a Latin root which means, "to send." Jesus explained that He had been sent to earth by the Father, and it is evident from the record of His life and ministry that His mission entailed a specific purpose.

He explained to His apostles – itself a Greek word deriving from a root which means, "sent out" – that what they had seen and experienced in *His* mission, they were to replicate and expand in *theirs* (cf. Jn. 14.12). The followers of Christ, being disciples, are also His "sent ones," sent into the world *together* with a mission that intends to carry on and carry further the mission Jesus Himself came to fulfill.

Local churches are the embodiment today both of the resurrection life of Jesus and the legacy of the apostles. They are, in other words, communities of "sent ones" whose overarching purpose is to replicate and extend the mission of Jesus and His apostles within their own communities.

Church, therefore, should not be understood as something we go *to* – as in, "Where do you go to church?" – but as something we are sent out *from*. All believers, being followers of Christ and heirs of the apostolic legacy and mandate, are apostles and missionaries and "sent out" ones for Jesus. Together their communities serve as both signs and outposts of the Kingdom of God.

Sent like Jesus

In order to understand our mission, we need to look carefully at the mission of Jesus. Two foci define the reason for Jesus' being sent from the Father.

First, Jesus was sent to bring near the Kingdom of God. God has always been King over the world and everything in it. But He chose to rule the world at a distance, as it were, for many thousands of years, exercising only a remote authority over the peoples of the earth, leaving them to their own designs and the schemes of the devil. God continued to order the cosmos and provide abundant blessings of life, community, culture, and bounty to the peoples of the earth (Acts 14.17), but He held back from asserting Himself *spiritually* into their midst, so as to advance His preferred agenda among the nations.

With the coming of Jesus, all that changed. As we see in His life, works, preaching, and teaching, the announcement that God's Kingdom had "come near," was "at hand," or even was "within you" took center stage in all Jesus did. In Jesus, through His work of salvation and by the outpouring of His Spirit, God was beginning a new period of human history, a period in which, increasingly, His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit expands to encompass the world and its peoples and cultures (Is. 9.6, 7; Dan. 2.44, 45).

This focus on the Kingdom allowed Jesus to accomplish the second reason for which He had been sent, that is to glorify God in all His works (Jn. 17.4). God the Father intends that the knowledge of His glory should cover the earth as the waters cover the seas (Hab. 2.14), and we certainly see this in every aspect of Jesus' life and ministry. Now He is determined that Jesus, by His Word and Spirit, in and through His Church, should fill all things with Himself, thus bringing the glory of God to light in all aspects of life, society, and culture (Eph. 1.22, 23; 4.10; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Thus, the mission of Jesus – to advance God's Kingdom and bring His glory to light – continues today in those He has sent, like Himself, to fulfill the good purposes of God.

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Rediscovering mission

But when we look at the churches in our land, is this what we see? Do we see whole communities of people becoming equipped, week by week, and sent out into every nook, cranny, and corner of their society to bring the glory of God to light in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities? To announce with joy and boldness the arrival through them of a Kingdom not of this world, and to call every knee to bow and every tongue to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father?

Well, it's not what I see, and I doubt it's what very many of us see, either. Churches treat "mission" as something they pay others to do in distant lands or among the needy and downtrodden – people who don't attend our church. "Mission" takes a special calling, or requires some special and usually short-term program, involving only a few people in the church.

But the work of mission as Jesus intends it is the work of the entire church, the goal of which is to turn the world of their local community rightside-up under the Kingship of Jesus Christ (Acts 17.1-9). Every member of every local church is a missionary in this respect, sent from the church to shine the light of Christ into every area of life, culture, and society. Churches are made up of people with differing vocations, and each member engages his calling as one who has been sent like Jesus.

We need training, vision, encouragement, the assistance of our fellow church members, and meaningful accountability to one another if we are to fulfill the mission for which our church has been sent to our community. A church that does not seek the Kingdom of God together cannot *sign* the Kingdom to its community and will not serve as an *outpost* from which the Kingdom makes progress, week by week.

And such a church, for all its outward trappings and earnest intentions, is in fact *no* church at all.

For reflection

1. What does T. M. mean when he says "the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work"?
2. What makes something excellent? Do you agree that Christians should be characterized by excellence in all things? Why or why not?
3. How can we discover what "excellence" would look like for the work we've been given to do?

Next steps: How do your pastor and church leaders understand the mission of your church? Ask them.

Prayer:

7 Growing Together

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ... Ephesians 4.11-13

Many members, one body

Local churches are comprised of members, disciples of Jesus Christ who covenant together to be His Body through prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, and mission in their local community. Christ has called His followers to make disciples, and this requires both that each of us improve our own walk with and work for the Lord, and that we encourage and assist our fellow disciples in improving theirs (Heb. 10.24).

Every church will manifest a diversity of gifts, expressed through a wide range of callings, with which the members of the Body of Christ are sent out to into their community to bring near the Kingdom of God and to glorify Him in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

We have been exploring the kind of *communal* disciplines necessary for local churches to fulfill their calling and promise, corporate prayer, worship, ministry, fellowship, and mission being the primary disciplines we must learn, practice, and master.

But we need to make sure we're all "on the same page" about the end we seek in taking up such disciplines as a community. Called to follow Christ and to further the Kingdom and glory of God, we can succeed in *neither* of these unless we do so through the local church. Thus, guiding all our discipleship and ministries must be a common commitment to the agenda which our Lord Jesus outlined when He declared, "I will build My Church" (Matt. 16.18).

We must discipline ourselves, in other words, to envision and work for a healthy, growing local church in all we do.

Healthy churches

I suspect that very few churches these days would describe themselves as "fit" or in "great shape." This is simply to admit that our churches are not healthy. They're not strong in unity or thriving in good works of ministry, they're not furthering the work of the Kingdom, and they're not winning many people to Jesus Christ. Most churches are struggling to keep and maintain the members they have, meet the requirements of their budgets, and keep the problems and "issues" to a manageable level.

Most churches, in other words, are on ecclesiastical life support, holding out and holding on, hoping for some miracle cure to revive and renew them.

But a church can't grow toward health if it has a poor understanding and little vision for what that means. Perhaps, when we think of a "healthy" church, most church members think in terms of lots of attenders, plenty of activities and programs, lots of happy members, and no financial worries. Isn't this what every congregation would love to know?

But none of these ideas about what constitutes a healthy church have any Biblical warrant whatsoever. And yet we pursue them tirelessly. Is this because we have no other, better concept to guide our thinking and work?

Paul tells us that all the saints of a local church are to be equipped for works of ministry, so that all may come

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together in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God – we’ve talked about this earlier – and to the full measure of the stature of Christ, to maturity as an expression of His Body. A healthy, growing church, thus, finds all the members working together to realize the vision of unity and maturity that Paul spells out in our text, so that all our disciplined efforts work together to cause “growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4.16).

But we must first embrace Paul’s vision of a healthy, growing church, then resolve together to bring all our efforts to bear on building Christ’s church according to this vision, as a sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God.

In a healthy, growing church all the members are becoming equipped with the spiritual, relational, and vocational disciplines that will enable and prepare them for works of ministry in all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. They will strive together for a church that works hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Out of that unity will grow a maturity of discernment, teaching and witnessing and mutual encouragement, the use and development of all spiritual gifts, and a community defined by true prayer, worship, fellowship, ministry, and mission, making increase of itself in love.

Jesus is building His Church, and Paul tells us what a built-up church should look like. We must embrace Jesus’ agenda and take up Paul’s blueprint so that all our labors in the Lord will work together, in a disciplined and fruitful manner, to make our churches the Kingdom signs and outposts Jesus Christ intends they should be.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that we should be rather more diligent about exercising a “self-watch”? Why or why not?
2. What is your approach to working for improvement in your calling?
3. How can our spiritual disciplines contribute to improving our vocational disciplines?

Next steps: How do the leaders of your church determine the state of your church’s overall health? What do they do to address areas of weakness in the health of your church? Talk with a few of your church leaders about these questions.

Prayer:

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Questions for Discussion

1. What do we mean by “communal” disciplines? How do these relate to spiritual, relational, and vocational disciplines?
2. This study treats praying together and worshiping together as the most important communal disciplines. Why? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
3. As you see it, what percent of your church are actively working to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? On what observations do you base that assessment?
4. What are the primary obstacles to getting all the people of your church engaged in these communal disciplines?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you planning to put that lesson to use in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Additional insights, questions, or thoughts:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.