

The Great Commission, Core of our Ecclesiology (Part 3)

By Jay Wegter

Today's church growth methods seldom rise above 'cloning through technique'. Thus, how are you 'doing church' is a critical question. For, what you do and how you do it is your functional ecclesiology.ⁱ Christ declares His mission to be binding men together in indissoluble bonds. In His 'High Priestly prayer, our Lord stated, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me" (Jn 17:22-23). The brotherliness of those who believe establishes the truthfulness of Jesus' words. Thus, we could accurately say the world is brought to God by the gospel through the testimony of Christians loving one another."ⁱⁱ

*The church Body is a brotherhood—a school for training in fellowship, a home to cultivate social virtues, graces, and sympathies, and holy service by common allegiance to the Son of God.*ⁱⁱⁱ In accordance with the words of Jesus in John 17—believers must learn how to live together to convince the world that He is what He claims to be. Through the communion of the saints, those watching get to see what God is and what He is able to do. Thus, count it your joy and privilege to train your fellow church members in the fine art of living together.^{iv}

No ordinary love is called for, but love fashioned after His own, a love that produces a supernaturally unified community." The brotherhood known as the Body of Christ is a spiritual creation; a work in which men are recreated in Christ in which their hearts and lives are bound together. This miracle is Christ's life in His church manifested in spiritual fellowship known as Body life. Without this spiritual fellowship, faith is empty, hope darkened, and love is starved. "Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful" (Col 3:14-15).

A man's love for the church is proportional to his relationship between himself and fellow members.

Merely listening to sermons does not make one a church member. Cultivating rich fellowship is the essence of genuine membership and is the task of those shepherding and preaching. There is a sharp distinction between a church and an audience. A superficial minister works merely to grow an audience. In that arrangement folks scatter after the performance. An audience is a crowd, a church is a family. An audience is a gathering, a church is a fellowship. An audience is a collection, a church is an organism. An audience is a heap of stones, a church is a temple. Only a genuine disciple of the Lord can build a church. So many churches today are audiences and not the brotherhoods which exhibit Christ through the relational life of the Body.^{vi}

By divine design the grace of Christ flows through social bonds. The Lord is the master stonemason. He fits closely together the living stones in His temple. "And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up

spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4-5). But a biblical metaphor of even closer contact than stones is that of a living Body. Each organ exists for the life and prosperity of the whole organism, each is needed by all. For every joint supplies its contribution to the edification of the Body (Eph 4:16). As such the church as a brotherhood creates an atmosphere in which gospel truths blaze through mutual building up of one another.

Staff pastors unassisted cannot possibly shepherd everyone and hold all the members vertically aligned. Therefore, the true fruit of the leaders’ labor is the ability to build and maintain a compact and conquering brotherhood. To grow a brotherhood many sermons and much biblical instruction must frequently address the duties Christians owe to one another.^{vii} The dynamic life of the Body is not an automatic given for believers. For there are specific conditions necessary to live together as brothers; *prefer the other, please your brother unto his edification, submit to one another, forgive one another freely, bear burdens, demonstrate long-suffering, love the brethren, show hospitality, preserve unity, etc.* Church leaders must never lose sight of the aim to build brotherhood, in response to Christ, the Master Builder. For our Lord is building an all-new kind of humanity made up of differing social levels, callings, gifts, and backgrounds, held together organically by possessing life in Christ in common.^{viii}

God’s purpose is centered in creating a new humanity in Christ—that is why Christ is building His church.

Where God’s Word is not heard, chaos and darkness close in. The spurning of God’s rule began with the rejection of God’s Word—the Lie believed and acted upon in Eden was the inception of this darkness. When God called Abraham, His plan was to restore His rule and create a new humanity. Paul calls it *the gospel announced in advance* (Gal 3:6-9). God is reestablishing His rule through His Word. The lie of the serpent portrayed God’s rule as harsh and tyrannical. The recovery of the reality that God’s rule is life, love, blessing, peace, justice, and freedom is the fruit of the gospel. In Body life there is a constant mutual reminder by means of the gospel of God’s perfect, all-wise loving rule. For life under Christ’s rule is life itself.^{ix}

God has made us, persons in community, for the community of the Body of Christ is the vehicle through which He reveals His glory. As His image-bearers in our natural condition we fall short of His glory by manifesting flesh fruits that short circuit genuine community. But God’s plan is to create a new humanity of men and women made new in Christ (Col 3:9-11). Thus, the Church is not something optional; it’s at the heart of God’s purpose. Jesus came to create a people who would model through Body life what it means to live under His rule. The church is a glorious outpost of the kingdom of God, an embassy of Heaven (Jn 17:20-23).^x

The gospel defines the doctrine of the church and the relationships within the Body of Christ.

The gospel believed and obeyed prepares a person for the deep community of Body life. We’re not saved by principles and strategies, but by a divine Person. Many today speak about doctrine but are reluctant to speak about the Savior in intimate terms. But as Andrew Bonar has explained so clearly, *keep Christ joined to doctrine, otherwise doctrine deadens.*^{xi} Paul speaks

of Christ in this manner, “. . .that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:16-19a). The gospel, the Word of Christ, and the gospel community are essential to the life and vitality of a believer. My heart needs to hear that Word often among the community of God’s people so that the Word is brought to bear on my life frequently and perceptively. We speak to our brethren for their edification (1 Cor 14:4).

It is through the Word among His people that the Holy Spirit works to break the sinners’ heart and renew it so that I love God and the brethren truly, madly, and deeply. The gospel breaks my heart over sin, purifies my heart, makes it fit to receive grace and love, and thus makes me capable of being a new creature, who is part of a new humanity in a supernatural community (1 Pet 1:22-25).^{xii} Christianity means community through and in Jesus Christ. It means that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for all eternity.

But God has put his Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged. He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation.^{xiii}

And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God stipulates that they gather, and they are blessed as He gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this “alien righteousness...” which they possess by gracious imputation (2 Cor 5:21). A Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Among men there is strife. But Scripture affirms, “He is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God and peace among justified men and women (Col 1:20). Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But, without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own self-absorbed, guarded egos. Christ opened the way to God and to our brother. Justification by faith means that Christ carries our status before God; that is foundational to true community.^{xiv}

When God’s Son took on flesh, he truly and bodily took on, out of pure grace, our being, our nature, ourselves. This was the eternal counsel of the triune God. Now we are in Him. Where He is, there we are too, in the incarnation, on the Cross, and in His resurrection. We belong to Him because we are in Him (Eph 1:4, 13-14). That is why the Scriptures call us the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). One is brother to another person only through Jesus Christ. I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him.

This fact that we are brethren only through Jesus Christ is of immeasurable significance. Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. My brother is rather that other person who has been redeemed by Christ, delivered from his sin, and called to faith and eternal life. Consequently, what determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.^{xv}

The priesthood of every believer is essential to the true community inherent in the body of Christ.

The priesthood of believers inherent in our identity in the gospel is incredibly important to the Body's function of disciple-making. It affirms the work of the Spirit in the lives of all believers, it affirms the ministry potential of all believers, it affirms the responsibility of all believers, and it empowers all believers to function as needed for the ministry of the church. By contrast what we see today is a strengthening of the priesthood of the pastoral staff only. The ministry of the church has been focused in one position even though the Bible is clear that there are multiple leadership roles.^{xvi} A professional leadership has resulted in a reduction of those who feel qualified to minister. The net result is a weaker church lacking the infrastructure to multiply, expand or grow. Pastors should be equipping people for every ministry in life and pushing them out into the lost world to make a difference, rather than locking them behind doors with church forms designed to weaken the believer.^{xvii} Full congregational participation is the biblical model of ministry.^{xviii}

The church as defined by the N.T. is a spiritually gifted Body. The church of Jesus Christ is a supernatural, Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-empowered, living community of Christ-like servants who minister Christ's love and care for one another (1 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 4:10). The same Spirit who grants life in Christ and links us together, also empowers and enables every believer. Thus, ministry is the sacred privilege and duty of every member of the Body. All the members are to perform a vital function, caring, building up, ministering to one another. With each member functioning as God intended, the Body or community of believers will grow, and an amazing interplay of gifts and services will result. Christ's pattern is a ministerial Body—this is the master plan of the Master.

By contrast, a solely professional ministry is harmful to the sanctification of the members. Why? Because it opposes the biblical structure of the Body. Shared, brotherly leadership by ordinary men who are empowered by the Spirit is the structure established by the Apostles (Acts 20:28). The 'nature' of the church is seen in its N.T. metaphors: *a temple, family, body, flock, and bride*—in each case, Christ is Lord and Source; He is the Head, the Husband, the Cornerstone, and the Shepherd. The church as a family community captures the fact that only the most intimate human relationships could express the love, closeness, privileges, and new relationships that exist between Christ and the members of His Body.^{xix}

The Body of Christ is a 'supernatural community' of individuals who have life in Christ in common and who have been given a new identity by grace.

The gospel creates and defines the church—a new humanity made up of believer-priests who share life in Christ. To be gospel-centered and community-centered means church is joined to our identity in Christ, church is not merely a responsibility or Sunday duty to be juggled with other commitments. The gospel means our identity is found in Christ which shapes the whole of life so that life and mission become total church. The gospel is the story of God creating a new humanity in Christ. We need Spirit-inspired imagination to reconfigure church and mission around the gospel Word and the gospel community—it is the biblical perspective versus the default mode of an institutional, traditional model.^{xx}

Our identity as Christians is defined by the gospel and the community. Thus, what we do is always defined by the gospel, and our context is always our belonging in Christ's Body, the church. Often, we do not *do truth* well because we neglect the community which issues from intentional Body life. The number one reason truth is not applied and lived out is because people are not sharing their lives for the purpose of mutual edification.^{xxi}

The Body is the context for transformation, it is where equipping, nurture, and edification occur. Sanctification and disciple-making are group efforts.

Body life exists to fulfill the Great Commission—i.e. to bring believers to maturity. Truth cannot be taught effectively outside of close relationships. The truth of the gospel becomes compelling as we see it transforming lives in the routine of daily messy relationships. 'Life on life' discipleship means shared life public and private—this is essential to holistic discipleship. Therefore truth 'incarnated' in life is the goal. For reaching the goal only one method is possible—the biblical one—discipleship. Whole persons must teach whole persons, "the Word must be made flesh" in the formation of disciples.^{xxii}

Information can be imparted, techniques can be learned, skills acquired, but without the relational dimension, it will always fall short of true discipleship. The effects of the Fall are reversed as we become lovers once more of God and others. This is the 'gospel mold' into which we are poured which forms us around Christ's purposes. Shared life, known as Body life is God's intended arena for discipleship and growth. Jesus commanded His disciples to go and make disciples of the nations, teaching them to obey what He commanded. The most significant obstacle is sin. This is precisely why discipleship is essential. As a Christian, I am a disciple. That's an identity not an event. I never reach a point where I no longer require daily discipleship by the Word of the gospel in the gospel community. Theology involves the hermeneutic of obedience, it's dangerous to pursue theology for academic reasons only—theology must stay joined to the mission of the church which Christ has commanded in the Great Commission.^{xxiii}

The main business of Body life or assembly life is the equipping and edification of believers. Body life exists to nurture disciples. When mutual ministry becomes central to the life of the Body, the result is *unity, maturity, stability, and growth* (Eph 4:13-15). Maturity is a mutual process in the Body of Christ achieved by interdependent ministry of Body life. That is Christ's pattern, or 'blueprint'. Biblical Body life exists to nurture disciples to maturity through the exercise of our spiritual gifts (Col 1:28-29). Gifts of the Body that are recognized, developed, and utilized are never a coincidence; that development depends upon a continued emphasis upon

equipping the members of the Body for the work of ministry. There must be active encouragement and expectation that spiritual gifts will be used.^{xxiv}

Mutual care is the catalyst for a congregation's spiritual growth. The church's spiritual growth catalyst is soul care. Body life is expressed through the mutual edification of the members of the Body. That is *koinonia*. Mutual edification through the exercise of our gifts requires the formation of close relationships. Thus, the fellowship of the church exists to know each other closely enough to edify, build up, bear burdens, confess faults, rebuke, exhort, admonish, teach, and encourage (Col 1:28-29). Lay shepherding helps grow a church into a caring church. The lay shepherds' care catalyzes the church so that a caring church becomes a healthy church (1 Cor 13).^{xxv}

Body life exists to make, nurture, and mature disciples.

Jesus defines mission as a process of discipleship. In the Great Commission He establishes the necessity and means of universal discipleship. Baptism marks our birth into the family of God. This is the context where I am made a disciple. In the family of God, I can care and be cared for, love and be loved, forgive and be forgiven, admonish and be admonished, encourage and be encouraged—all of which are essential to being a disciple of the risen Lord.^{xxvi}

Jesus' strategy is train and release, conversely the strategy of cultural Christianity is to convert and retain. Jesus' strategy is to create open, authentic, learning, praying communities that are focused on making whole-life disciples who live and share the gospel as they relate to people in their daily lives. This means ending the distinction between full-time and part-time ministry and ending the distinction between Sunday morning and Monday morning. We need non-full-time leaders, lay shepherds who can model whole-life, gospel-centered, mission living. This involves creating a church culture that celebrates gospel living day to day. The upshot is we need more lay leaders or lay shepherds who are highly visible to the Body of Christ as opposed to the select visibility of ordained clergy.^{xxvii}

A church without discipleship is doomed to spiritual retardation. The moment these discipleship relationships do not exist in our churches we find ourselves in a lose-lose situation. For new believers have no one to provide wise counsel, no examples to follow, and no accountability. And mature believers have no one to spur them on to new levels of wisdom as knowledge turns to action in thought word and deed.^{xxviii} In disciple-making we teach who and what the disciple has become because of his relationship with Christ. The Christian life comes out of this new identity defined by our Lord's call upon our life. Our new identity is a corporate identity with community injunctions. "For we are members of one another" (Eph 4:25). Consider that most N.T. commands are people to people commands.

The believer has been equipped by Christ through regeneration and the indwelling Spirit to be a blessing to others. In that sense, none of our reception of spiritual benefits from the Lord makes us an 'end user'—we are called by God to be a blessing to others. We love because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). We are to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we might prayerfully speak the Word of God to our brethren (Col 3:16). This should be increasingly natural for the Christian, so that it does not involve courage or risk. A huge part of embracing the biblical perspective is for each believer to see him or herself as truly 'an

instrument in the hands of the Redeemer'. We are commanded to think about ways to stimulate our brethren to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24-25). There is intentionality here, premeditation. Our edification and encouragement of our brethren is the overflow of our devotional life and fellowship with the Lord. For abiding in Christ is the source of our fruit bearing (Jn 15:4-8).

The Great Commission is about obedience-based discipleship.

Why must the members of the Body of Christ 'excel' at admonishment? Spiritual, mutual care involves constantly exposing the deceitfulness of sin. Sin is deceitful, that's why it never presents itself as sin. It creeps up on us camouflaged and reasonably disguised as fulfillment. Often, we are the last to notice its deceit. But others can and often do. That is why being part of a gospel community is so vital. Unfortunately, so much of church ministry, especially counseling, is not preventative, but reactionary.^{xxix} Perhaps the greatest weakness in the body of Christ today is that we have surrendered our responsibility to discipline or admonish one another (Prov. 9:8). The mantra, "I'm ok, you're ok" has eaten up our courage to admonish one another. That makes for unhealthy churches, for the Apostle Paul establishes that mutual admonishment is a mark of a healthy church body (Rom 15:14).^{xxx}

We must take Christ's command very seriously: "Teaching them to observe/obey." The hermeneutics of community is closely related to the hermeneutics of obedience. There is a close connection between understanding the Bible and obeying the Bible, between knowledge and discipleship. The readiness to obey Christ's words is the pre-requisite to understanding them. And if discipleship was necessary for understanding, then a discipling community was necessary for understanding.^{xxxi} "We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:9a-10).

In using Bible-oriented materials, there is a tendency to emphasize knowing God's Word with some admonition to obey, but without the relationship necessary to see if it happens. There is a misconception that if people know what is right, they will do what is right. Experience tells us this is not the case, yet we function as if it is. Disciples need the influence of mature disciples in their lives, "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" says Jesus. They need relationships with these mature disciples that permit them to discuss any aspect of life and deal with any problem or sins they have and grow through experience as the wisdom born of obedience replaces knowledge. This is what the apostles offered in discipling the Thessalonian believers. "Just as you know how we *were* exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father *would* his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:11-12).

Dear brethren, in days ahead the church of Jesus Christ is going to be severely tested. If the church is to stand strong against the winds of global evil, a vibrant Body life must be present. As we've seen in this article, the unity of the Body which testifies of Christ (Jn 17:22-23) is maintained and expressed by its two pillars. Pillar one is the brotherhood we have in Christ, lived out in obedience to the N.T. obligations toward our brethren. The Scriptures state unequivocally the conditions necessary for this brotherhood to thrive. These obligations to our

brothers and sisters are often referred to as the, *one another commands*. Pillar two is the Body's mandate to edify itself by its members' gifts. These gifts are designated as the *manifestation of the Spirit*, given by God for the common good and edification of the Body (1 Cor 12:4-7ff.). When the Body is engaged in the mutual edification described above, supernatural unity and community are the fruit thereof.

- It is a unity which bears witness that the Father has sent the Son
- It is a unity that bears fruit for God giving evidence we are His disciples
- It is a unity which manifests to the world our life under Christ's rule
- It is unity which fulfills the Great Commission by bringing disciples to maturity
- It is a unity which perseveres in the face of ever greater hostility to Christ

End Notes:

ⁱ Charles Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd*, p. 77

ⁱⁱ Charles Jefferson, *The Building of the Church*, "Building the Brotherhood," p. 48

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 52

^{iv} Ibid, p. 57

^v Ibid, p. 54

^{vi} Ibid, pp. 66-67

^{vii} Ibid, p. 71

^{viii} Ibid, pp. 58, 76

^{ix} *Total Church: a radical reshaping around Gospel and Community*, Tim Chester, Steve Timmis, p. 25

^x Chester, Timmis, pp. 47, 50

^{xi} Andrew Bonar, *The Person of Christ*

^{xii} Ibid, pp. 206-207

^{xiii} *Life Together*, Dietrick Bonhoeffer

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} *Contagious Disciple Making*, David Watson and Paul Watson, p. 51

^{xvii} Ibid, pp. 52-53

^{xviii} Bruce Stabbert, *The Team Concept*, Preface

^{xix} Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 15-17

^{xx} Chester, Timmis, pp. 18-20

^{xxi} Ibid, pp. 16-17

^{xxii} Jay Adams in Chester, Timmis, p. 118

^{xxiii} Ibid, pp. 121, 161

^{xxiv} Gary Inrig, *Life in His Body*, pp. 44-47

^{xxv} Howard Stone, *The Caring Church*, p. 74

^{xxvi} Chester, Timmis, p. 112

^{xxvii} Ibid, pp. 36-37

^{xxviii} Watson and Watson, pp. 204-205

^{xxix} Chester, Timmis, p. 151

^{xxx} Walter Hendrichsen, *Disciples are Made not Born*, p. 74

^{xxxi} Chester, Timmis, p. 161