

**PART 2:
THE ROLES OF FAMILIES AND INTERNATIONAL TEAMS
IN CHURCH PLANTING**

DISCIPLING AND CHURCH PLANTING THROUGH
ONE'S CHURCH AND FAMILY

by JF

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You are most likely reading *Seedbed* because you have an interest in seeing Arab Muslims trust in Christ and grow in their faith. Whether you are currently discipling a believer from a Muslim background (BMB) or praying to do so in the future, what goals do you have in mind for their maturity? Some of us were disciplined in one-on-one relationships, where the measure of our growth was our ability to feed ourselves and practice spiritual disciplines without depending upon others. Such familiar discipleship models as well as recent models of *Insider* ministry can promote isolation of BMBs and are therefore contrary to the goal of our mission, which is to plant churches! Gathered groups or communities of believers is the desired fruit of obeying the commission to make disciples (of the Arab Muslim nations in particular), teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded. Community provides not only the end goal, but is also critical to success during the *process* of discipleship and church planting.

The purpose of this article is to draw the reader's attention to the essential role that community plays in discipling the nations. First, I want to convince you to model the church, teach on the church and disciple towards an identifiable gathering of believers from the very beginning. Secondly, through a brief review of scriptural teaching on marriage and parenting, I hope to refresh the reader's understanding of the strategic importance of family relationships in reaching our goal of church planting, as they model the gospel, sanctification and ministry.

'Body-building' was the theme of a recent conference designed to equip members of our company and their team-mates in discipleship and church planting. The theme passage was Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV):

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but *fellow citizens* with God's people and *members of God's household, built on*

the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole *building* is *joined together* and *rises* to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being *built together* to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

This passage uses the metaphor of *building* to illustrate what God is doing in reconciling us to Himself through Christ in the Spirit. He is not building individuals. The *underlined* words of the passage emphasize that our identity as believers reconciled to the Father is by its very nature corporate. The Apostle Paul instructs the Ephesians on two relational contexts which are crucial to the success of discipleship and church planting: *the church* and *the family*.

1. The Church

Why mention the church as a means when it is the goal? Firstly, it is actually quite easy to lose our vision of the goal. Even if severe pressures of persecution isolate BMBs, the discipler must continue to presume and teach toward the end goal, with the assumption that isolation is only a temporary exception. The church, specifically its visible manifestation in local communities of believers, is a major theme of the New Testament and a significant expression of the life of the Kingdom of God. Its birth and expansion is the subject of the book of Acts, and most of the epistles are either written to churches or about churches.

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Sin, pettiness and hypocrisy among the living stones and builders of the church over the centuries have often resulted – even among missionaries – in a negative attitude toward the church. As believers whose final authority in such matters is Scripture, we would be helped by taking God's perspective of the church, and its glorious identity and purpose! The book of Ephesians teaches us that the church is "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:23 ESV); his instrument for making known his manifold wisdom (3:10); and a means of glory to the Father for all generations (3:21).

We'll now look at four statements regarding the importance of the church as a critical relational context for our discipleship and church planting.

1.1. The church is vital to our identity in Christ.

Paul exhorts the Ephesians to 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3).' Regeneration by the Holy Spirit not only leads to personal justification, but places us 'in Christ' and into his body. The Spirit creates unity among believers through Christ who is our peace (2:14-17), but this unity becomes visible when believers make the effort to maintain the bond of peace. Unity in isolation is absurd! It requires a community or relational context.

Jesus taught that the visible unity of believers is an evangelistic apologetic, even in overcoming objections to the Sonship of Jesus!¹

The foundation for our unity as one body in Christ is our faith, or more accurately, *the* one faith, in the Triune God (4:4-6). Lest one conclude that isolated professions of this one faith provide the necessary unity of an invisible, universal church, Paul promotes a unity that is also expressed in visible practices, such as baptism (4:5). The water baptism commanded by Jesus² is a picture of what the Spirit has done: 'For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.'³ This work of the Spirit acknowledged in baptism joins us to other believers in the universal body of Christ, but according to 1 Corinthians 12, we cannot be walking in the Spirit if we intentionally disregard the body of Christ and neglect our service to other flesh and blood members of Christ.

The New Testament uses many terms that are corporate in nature to describe our identity in Christ. Only in relation together, not as individuals, can we be understood to be the body of Christ, a holy temple in the Lord, and the bride of Christ. If this is who we *are*, how can we be who we are in isolation? Whether we are discipling individuals or groups, we ought to teach and train toward the goal of a community of believers.

1.2. The church is an essential community context for the application of discipleship

1.2.1. We obey in the church

In discipleship, our commission is to teach disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded. A significant majority of the commands of the New Testament can only be obeyed in community!

According to the Apostle Paul, we and the BMBs we disciple can live lives worthy of our calling by being humble, gentle, patient, and bearing with one another in love (4:1-2). How can we bear with one another in love in isolation?! It is much easier to be humble and patient when alone. Ephesians 4:17 – 5:21 describes the character and holy lifestyle of the believer who has been accurately taught in Christ, and the majority of its content only makes sense in the context of relationships. The New Testament is full of 'one another' commands which describe the life of the Kingdom: 'righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.'⁴ This kingdom is not defined by words only – for example, lots of talk about sublime laws – but rather by power.⁵ The Gospel is the power of God not

1. John 17:21, 23

2. Matthew 28:19

3. 1 Corinthians 12:13, NIV

4. Romans 14:17

5. 1 Corinthians 4:20



only to save, but also to enable the obedience of those who obey the Gospel, deny themselves, and follow their Master.⁶ This power is immensely practical. Rather than merely putting on a show, like commanding a tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, it enables a believer to forgive his brother⁷. *Community is not optional in discipleship.*

The Apostle John writes 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.'⁸ Jesus taught his disciples that the evidence of our discipleship is our love for one another.⁹ This is not manifest in a generic love for 'all believers' of the universal body of Christ, but rather in an 'instance' of the body of Christ: a local worshipping community. It is very easy to love all believers when you stay away from close relationships with them! Even our personal understanding of God's love is a corporate experience, as we grasp its dimensions 'together with all the saints (3:18).'

1.2.2. We exercise spiritual gifts in the church

The victorious Christ led in procession those he redeemed from bondage to sin, and shares with them the spoils of his triumph: spiritual gifts (4:7-8, 11). We have already noted from 1 Corinthians 12 that our identity as the body of Christ necessitates a unified function of diverse members. Body parts in isolation may serve a function in a medical school where future doctors dissect them, but not in fulfilling the great commission! Leadership gifts have been given to equip the saints to exercise their gifts in order to build up the body of Christ (4:11-12). Our unity, maturity and fullness in Christ are the result of the members of the body practicing their spiritual gifts, which can only occur in the context of community (4:13).

1.2.3. Our growth in maturity comes through mutual accountability in the church

The Bible never implies instant sanctification for believers. We who are *born* again¹⁰ long for the word as infants long for milk;¹¹ we move on to solid food¹² and leave childhood behind¹³ in our thinking, though we continue to be childlike in regards to evil¹⁴ and trust.¹⁵ The Bible presumes by these metaphors of growth

6. Philippians 2:13

7. Luke 17:3-6; 1 Corinthians 13

8. 1 John 3:14, NIV

9. John 13:34, 35

10. John 3:3

11. 1 Peter 2:2

12. Hebrews 5:12-14

13. 1 Corinthians 13:11

14. 1 Corinthians 14:20

15. Mark 10:15

that real believers will grow spiritually in an ongoing process of transformation from glory to glory.¹⁶ Paul teaches us in Ephesians that this growth does not happen in a vacuum. False teaching and the many lies that bombard us can impede our growth (4:14). By speaking to one another in love, we can mitigate the effect of the lies to which we are susceptible, that we may grow up into our Head, that is Christ. This growth is not isolated, individual spiritual growth, but corporate growth, as 'the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (4:15-16).' Our spiritual growth is measured by maturity displayed as a community. This emphasis on community context is not to minimize the significant impact of one-on-one discipleship, mentoring and training, such as we see in the relationship between Paul and Timothy. The goal of such relationships should be fruit in the broader context of the body of Christ, with its diversity of gifts and relationships.

We cannot assume that BMBs will understand the biblical church model of community unless they see it and/or are taught it, because it is quite distinct from the mosque. The mosque is a meeting place, but its function does not depend upon committed relationships, reconciliation and unity. A Muslim can fulfil his religious obligation in any mosque. If a believer 'goes to church' but with a different group every week to avoid conflict and costly relationships, they are hardly living as a disciple of Christ and fulfilling the purpose for which they were baptised by the Holy Spirit into the one body and given spiritual gifts.

There is no such thing as a 'Christian-at-large.' As followers of Christ we are members of one another (4:25). Which others? Practically speaking, we are members of those we are in community with, exercising our spiritual gifts, speaking to one another in love and growing up into Christ.

Of the BMBs I have known, the ones who have shown significant growth are those who were immersed in community with other believers and *watched* the body function. Those who preferred the one-on-one relationship only, or applied the 'mosque mentality' to their understanding of the local church, had stunted growth.

1.3. The New Testament teaches us key characteristics of the church

1.3.1. The church is identifiable

The Greek word translated 'church' in our English Bibles is *ekklesia*, which means 'assembly' and implies a literal gathering together. The invisible bonds created by the Holy Spirit that make us the body of Christ become visible in local community. The majority of the New Testament uses of *ekklesia* refer to the concrete sense of a specific assembly in a home or city, or to the actual gathering together of an assembly. Our goal in church planting must be a group that is

16. 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 12:1; 2 Peter 1:3-12

identifiable as a local assembly of believers.

Not *any* gathering of believers can count as our target goal. We should be careful not to reduce our understanding of the church to Matthew 18:20: 'For where *two or three* come together in my name, there am I with them (NIV).' Note the 'for' introducing the sentence! The passage implies that the two or three is not the church. This teaching on reconciliation and attempted restoration is not only interpersonal, but finds its ultimate application in the assembly, the church. It implies that the community of believers is not secret and elusive, but a church that is self-identified as such, and has authority to choose to exclude someone (put them on the outside). Only a community that knows who is 'inside' can then know whom it is appropriate to treat as on the 'outside'.

The 'two or three' in verse 20 refers back to the authority of agreement by multiple witnesses in verses 16 and 19 ('take one or two more' and 'if two of you shall agree...') rather than the *ekklesia* (v 17), a larger group which then treats the unrepentant person as a pagan. A significant amount of New Testament teaching addresses conflicts and sin that arise in the context of committed relationships, rather than casual contact.

My intent here is not to disparage a *small* church, but rather to discourage the acceptance of the idea that a discipler meeting with isolated believers who will not meet with other believers should be the end goal.

1.3.2. The church has identifiable leadership

Church planting emphasizes addition and inclusion, but fruitfulness requires pruning and sometimes exclusion – whether due to dissension, immoral behaviour or false teaching. The practice of church discipline helps us understand that a local church, or 'instance' of the universal church, must be identifiable for the sake of understanding who is 'inside' and who is 'outside'. It also necessitates identifiable church leadership. Church discipline is a solemn duty conducted out of concern for the rest of the flock (such concern is characteristic of a 'pastor' or 'shepherd'), by leaders who are mature (that is, 'elders'), and discerning (that is, 'overseers').¹⁷ Church discipline also involves the congregation, who then relate to the disciplined person as one on the outside.¹⁸ Identifiable leadership, of course, is not only for protective purposes, but for the ministries of the word and prayer, casting vision and equipping God's people for works of service. Leadership also includes the critical 'hands' of the elders serving as deacons. The epistles give extensive instruction on the qualifications and responsibilities of those who function as pastor/elder/overseer and deacon.¹⁹ A church can be a church without appointed

17. The terms pastor/elder/overseer describe different characteristics of leaders in the church and are not three different offices: Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2

18. 1 Corinthians 5:11

19. 1 Timothy 3:1-12 and Titus 1:6-9 are the most explicit passages.

elders while potential leaders are growing and being affirmed by the group...²⁰ but the New Testament teaches that identifiable leadership is the goal.

1.3.3. The Church has identifiable practices

The New Testament teaching on the church includes many details on the content and conduct of gatherings of the assembly:

- To state the obvious, believers are not to forsake their gathering together!²¹
- Since the birth of the church, baptism has been recognized as the initiation rite which identifies who is 'in' the church.²²
- In the Lord's Supper, believers regularly declare their allegiance to Christ and the body.²³
- Worship practices include singing, prayer, reading of Scripture, apostolic teaching, a collection for the needy, and the functioning of the Spiritual gifts.²⁴

We should be encouraged by the evidence of God's grace even when a believer is in secret, or when we are discipling a believer who does not want to gather with others. My purpose is to keep the goal of our teaching and discipleship in mind, even when there is resistance.

1.4. We must model the church in our lives to plant it.

It is appropriate for us to evaluate the extent to which we are faithfully seeking to model being an *ekklesia* in our day to day lives. It is likely that we will reproduce our own attitudes in those we disciple.

- BMBs should sense that our spiritual life is fed by the body of Christ where we live (very few of us are so isolated that the only connection to an assembly is in our home country).
- BMBs should be able to watch us live out, with a body of believers, the 'one-another commands' that they read in the New Testament.
- BMBs should understand and observe that we live our Christian lives accountable to spiritual leaders of the church.
- BMBs should observe us serving our brothers and sisters from our local assembly. If we missionaries are 'too busy' with ministry to serve one another practically, then we will reproduce this attitude in the church we seek to plant.

20. The fact that Titus was to appoint elders for every town in Crete implies that there were churches which did not yet have elders (Titus 1:5).

21. Hebrews 10:25

22. 1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 2:38, 41; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 22:16

23. 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

24. Ephesians 5:19; Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 4:13; 1 Corinthians 12, 14, 16;

Consider the discipler who meets with a church planting team for strategy and prayer, and also participates in an expatriate church where they take communion, yet keeps the church group at arm's-length. BMBs who observe this situation may adopt an attitude that the local church you are seeking to plant with them is unimportant compared to ministry outreach and para-church activity.

Our spouses and children are not burdens which distract us from the 'real work'. They are the real work!

2. The Family

Our lives are very ministry-focused. We read books on ministry. We talk to churches about ministry and reaching Muslims to raise support. We write newsletters to our supporters about ministry. We have an identity with our team and our company that is centred on ministry in a very challenging cross-cultural context. But what about our spouses? What about our children? Where do they fit in?

Our spouses and children are not burdens which distract us from the 'real work'. They *are* the real work! If we neglect them for the sake of ministry, this will be at great cost not only to our families themselves, but also to our ministry, and to the church we are seeking to plant.

Among the very first instructions we should give to a BMB on their first steps of obedience is in the relational contexts of marriage and family.²⁵

- Is he or she a youth, or still living in close proximity to their parents? We must teach them to honour their father and mother. This 'first command with a promise' holds the greatest potential for longevity and peace with their family (6:1-3).
- Is she married? Instruct her in the biblical teaching on submission and respect for her husband, giving her a vision that she might win her husband 'without words'²⁶ by her behaviour (5:22-24).
- Is he married? Instruct him in the biblical teaching to love his wife as Christ loved the church; treating her with understanding²⁷ while nourishing and cherishing her (5:25-31).

Yes, we need to teach these passages, but more importantly for our end goal, we need to *live* them.

The Apostle Paul did not happen upon marriage as a convenient analogy for the relationship between Christ and his church. Rather, God himself created marriage to be an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church (5:31-33)!

Husband, do you want to do church planting? Love your wife. Even when she's not lovely! In this way you imitate your Master, who loves his bride – the

25. Ephesians 6:5-8 provides an additional significant relational context in the wider community where instruction is essential for fruitful living: work.

26. 1 Peter 3:1-6

27. 1 Peter 3:7

church – in spite of her blemishes. God uses your wife's unloveliness or lack of submission to expose sin in your heart, and lead you to the cross so that his Spirit may sanctify you!

Wife, do you want to plant churches? Submit to and respect your husband. You will be modelling how the church relates to Christ! God uses your husband's incomplete love to expose sin in your heart, and lead you to the cross, that his Spirit may sanctify you!

It is God's design that your marriage picture the Gospel in the home, with the husband embodying the sacrificial love of Christ, the wife personifying the response of the church and both showing the fruit of the Gospel as each allows the Spirit to use their partner's weaknesses to sanctify the other. Marriage is a catalyst for sanctification in our lives where the power of the Gospel is demonstrated.

Parenting is another context requiring not only instruction to the BMB, but also modelling by the discipler and church planter. As workers sent by churches to the field, labouring to see the church established, we are in *de facto* positions of church leadership. The sobering qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:4-5 apply to us: 'He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)' The accountability of fathers to bring up their children in the Lord (6:4) cannot be delegated, nor dismissed with an excuse of having a higher calling of planting churches. The issue of parenting is not simply one of avoiding disqualification, but modelling God's character – to your children, to the lost and to the church. God does not call himself *Father* because he discovered that earthly fathers provide a convenient model to help us understand his nature (3:14). Rather he created fatherhood to reflect his nature!²⁸

Ministry is a very easy vehicle for exasperating our children and provoking them to anger through neglect. Beware of a 'family versus ministry' dichotomy. Our calling as Christian fathers and mothers is also to minister to our families. Intentional ministry to your spouse and children is not only biblically required, it is very fruitful in church planting!

Mothers and fathers, I hope your goal is not simply to survive the growth of your children. God desires that you raise your children in the Lord with a view not to their eventually leaving your home, but a view of their children, and their children's children!²⁹ Through your marriage and parenting you have the potential to reach 1,000 generations!³⁰

One useful vehicle for bringing your children up in the instruction of the Lord is practicing the corporate spiritual discipline of 'family worship' through a

28. Mothers also reflect God's image and likeness in the care of their children. See Isaiah 49:15.

29. Psalm 78:3-8

30. Exodus 20:6

combination of reading, praying, scripture memory, and singing together. Besides being a vehicle for spiritual leadership of the family, family worship is something that BMBs need to see, so that they can have the tools to pass their faith to their children.

A clear request from BMBs given at a regional partnership event was, 'Show us how to do marriage and family, and we can figure out the church.' Church planters should not view the church, their spouse and children as obstacles to ministry.

Hospitality provides an excellent vehicle for multi-dimensional ministry. Families can work together in preparation for visitors. Children can enjoy relating to guests and be trained in serving others. BMBs can see from the inside how a Christian home functions as they observe our marriage and parenting. The antidote to the mess of 'dysfunctional families' and baggage is biblical teaching and wisdom. BMBs need *living* books on marriage and parenting: your lives!

If the reader is single, this teaching on marriage and parenting is still relevant to you because you have colleagues who are married with children who need encouragement in these areas. Also, the BMBs you disciple will need instruction in this, and you yourself may marry some day! Community among churches and teams is enhanced when families integrate singles into their lives and family activities. Realize that married church planters appreciate the greater availability their single colleagues have for ministry, and may hesitate to interrupt that activity for 'family time.' As in many aspects of our faith, the married and single could each take greater initiative toward the other, rather than expecting the other to make the first move.

Conclusion

In the past few decades, the Lord has shown us that he is building (and restoring) His church even in resistant Muslim countries. To fulfil our stated vision of planting churches, it is essential that we understand what the church is, and that the community nature of the church be evident in our lives, teaching, and discipleship practices from the very beginning so that we don't miss our target and produce believers who are content in isolation. The intense nature of our ministry can put our families at risk as we wrestle with the priorities of ministry, family and work. Marriage and parenting our children are themselves strategic callings in the contexts of our personal lives and families, as well as in planting churches.

A clear request from BMBs given at a regional partnership event was, 'Show us how to do marriage and family, and we can figure out the church.' Church planters should not view the church, their spouse and children as obstacles to ministry. Given their proper place in our lives, they will enhance our fruitfulness because the church and our families are vehicles for the Gospel and church planting.