

The Disciple-Making Church: Teaching Disciples to Obey All Christ Has Said about the Church

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by David Schrock

In 2001 I took a summer job at the Harris Teeter in Virginia Beach. While on “project” with Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru), I sought a place to work and witness for three months. Harris Teeter fit the bill, and hiring me they knew I’d return to Michigan in August.

That being known, Harris Teeter invested 20 man-hours to train me, like they did every new employee. On top of the on-the-job training I received working in the deli, they sent myself and another project member to “night school.” Over the course of two weeks, they paid us for our studies in a corporate classroom.

If you’re not familiar with Harris Teeter, it is a grocery store that prides itself as a “North Carolina based grocery committed to world class customer service.” Ask a manager and they will tell you they’re here to serve. Join their rewards program and you will become a “Very Important Customer.” Apply for a summer job—like I did—and they’ll train you for 20 hours.

I still remember some of the principles of customer service: “If a customer asks you for help finding a product, don’t point. Don’t explain the path to the product. Walk them to the aisle.” Harris Teeter was and is committed to giving customers the highest shopping experience. And all this for bread and meat that will go bad next week.

Church Membership: False and True

Many Christians approach church in a similar way. They create churches which provide the ultimate worship experience, and they encourage membership to secure your place as a “Very Important Customer.” For those wanting to grow closer with Christ, they brand themselves as a church that is here for you. And the membership class looks, therefore, like an orientation to a health club.

But is that the right way to approach church, membership, and life together in the body of Christ? Are we selling a product to customers who are looking for something spiritual? I think not. Rather, membership in the body of Christ is nothing like joining a club.

Jesus Christ bid his followers to “take up your cross daily and to follow me” (Luke 9:23). He told us that identifying with him will invite the world’s hatred (John 15:18–25). And only those who suffer with him will reign with him in glory (Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12). Therefore, when we offer our new members class, we do not orient the interested to the amenities of Occoquan Bible Church. We, instead, seek to train aspiring members for service in God’s local church.

Why do we approach membership like this? Because we believe the church of Jesus Christ is the most important thing on earth. And that membership is reserved for those who are born again. In this way, membership is not a 'work' Christians must do; it is rather a recognition of the work Christ has done in them. And it is an invitation for individuals to join the labors of brothers and sisters in Christ in God's local church.

At the same time, we believe God is raising people from the dead and moving them to serve Christ and suffer with him. Therefore, our membership class is designed to help Christians, young and old, to do that. It's intended to teach about the gospel, the nature of the church, the purpose and value of membership, and particular details about our church. Indeed, as we've ramped up our new membership class this year, we've done so to teach God's people God's designs about God's church.

Why Study the Church?

Over the next five weeks, we are going to do the same thing in our Sunday School hour. Just as we want those inquiring about membership to understand a biblical view of a Christ-centered, gospel-driven, disciple-making church, so we want our members to know and value the same.

Why focus on this topic in the church? Let me offer three reasons:

1. The church is more important than Harris Teeter (or any other earthly organization).

It is shameful that a corporate office would spend more time on training three-month employees than we would equipping saints for a lifetime of service in the church. We can only build up the body of Christ if we understand what the body of Christ is and is for. Therefore, we turn our attention to the church. We must fight the temptation to settle for the status quo and pray God would make us faithful in our discipleship. And that disciples would not only care about their own spiritual growth, but also the growth of other individuals. May God raise up disciples who see the wisdom of God's church and seek the welfare of their church as they serve Christ and live out their discipleship.

2. The church is the guardian and the outgrowth of the gospel.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:14–15, "I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." From the preceding context of instruction given to local church elders and deacons (3:1–13), it's plain the household in 3:15 is the local church, not the universal. And thus, he is calling local churches to protect and proclaim the gospel entrusted to them.

Such a charge should shape everything a church does. Thus to guard the gospel, we must know the gospel, preach the gospel, and create structures in the church which display and defend the gospel. Indeed, the church is what the gospel creates when it is believed; Ephesians 3:10 tells us the church is God's plan to display his wisdom; and we must do everything we can to guard the gospel and grow by the gospel. For this reason, attention to what Scripture says about the church is for the sake of the gospel.

3. The Great Commission requires faithful instruction about the church.

In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Jesus' have commanded. As evidence in Acts, whenever a group of baptisms occur in the same place, it will create churches as a gathering of disciples who identify with Jesus and meet regularly to worship him. Likewise, as disciples (lit. learners or apprentices) it is our calling to grow in our understanding of all God's counsel. Salvation immediately identifies us with Christ, and sanctification over time sets us on a journey of Christ-like conformity. In his wisdom, God intends for this growth in godliness to be found in the local church. As First Peter 1:22 says, we have been saved "for a sincere brotherly love." Indeed, we have not been saved to remain individual Christians floating freely on the wings of spiritual podcasts. We are called to bind ourselves to Christ and his people, members united to one another in the local church.

The Disciple-Making Church

For this reason, we invite you to join us for our five-week class on the nature and nurture of the church. Whether you are a member at OBC, a recent visitor, or a regular attender but non-member, we invite you to come and consider with us God's design for the local church as a people committed to Christ, to one another, and to the mission of making disciples.

The "Disciple-Making Church" is offered during both Sunday School hours (9:30am & 11:00am) downstairs in the Gathering Place. For those desiring membership (or who have only completed half the Discover OBC class), this class will meet the requirement of attending the Discover OBC class.

May God grow OBC in faith, hope, and love, as we fulfill his commandment to love one another and his commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David