

Chapter 5

The Status of People and the Responsibility of Believers

Objectives of this chapter: By the conclusion of this chapter, we will recognize the strategic importance and duty of the local church to evangelize, disciple, mentor, and send individuals to the harvest fields of the world.

How Is a Missionary Trained and Prepared For Service?

Individuals who want to become missionaries are often sent by their local church fellowships to schools and organizations for a period of specialized training. This is a wise and appropriate decision since these schools and organizations are able to help the potential missionary develop the unique insights and the practical skills needed for cross-cultural ministry activities.

However, most local churches do not recognize the significant responsibilities they have in the process of preparing God's people for service. Most church leaders do not have a deliberate strategy to help the members of their fellowships become spiritually mature and prepared for service. This chapter will explain how God has positioned the local church to be the primary means to evangelize, disciple, mentor, and then send qualified followers of Jesus Christ to the, as yet, unreached people groups of the world. Every local church fellowship needs to recognize the extraordinary contribution it can make to the expansion of God's kingdom here on earth.

There are Four Stages in the Spiritual Development of a Person

Scripture indicates that the local church works with individuals in four important ways. These four ways or stages represent the process through which a non-believer becomes a mature believer. Paul must have had this process in mind when he wrote his letter to the Church in Rome, and we will use many verses from this letter to support the illustrations in this chapter.

Stage One

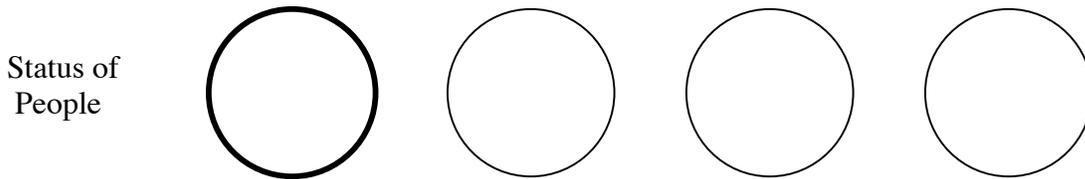
Scripture declares that all humans are under the condemnation and wrath of God because of their sinful nature. Paul explained that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" and that all of us "are storing up wrath ... for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed." Paul said that "all who sin apart from the law (referring to Gentiles) will perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law (referring to Jews) will be judged by the law."

Paul made it clear that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin," and he backed up his assertion with a long list of Old Testament quotations: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The first circle represents the person who is Under Condemnation:

Romans 2:2-16
3:9-20

**Under
Condemnation**



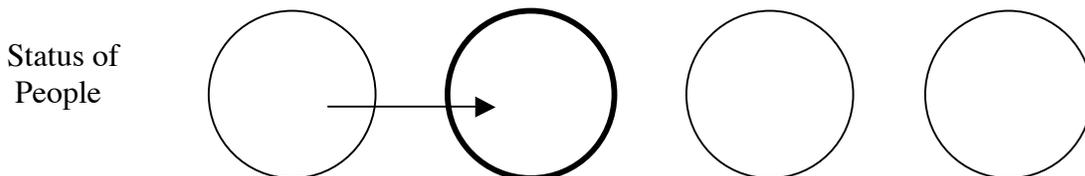
The Scriptures Offer Hope to People Under Condemnation

The first circle represents the non-believer and, unless there is a change in his or her spiritual orientation, the non-believer is destined for hell. Fortunately the Scriptures offer hope to those who recognize their spiritual poverty and confess Jesus Christ as their Savior. Paul wrote, "...a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ... and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The key thought here is concisely stated in Romans 8:1, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In other words, if the status of a person changes from non-belief to belief and from unrighteousness to the righteousness provided by God, then the person is no longer Under Condemnation but is "In Christ."

The second circle represents the person who has become a believer:

Romans 2:2-16 3:21-24
3:9-20 8:1-4

**Under
Condemnation** **In
Christ**



The New Believer Is a “Babe in Christ”

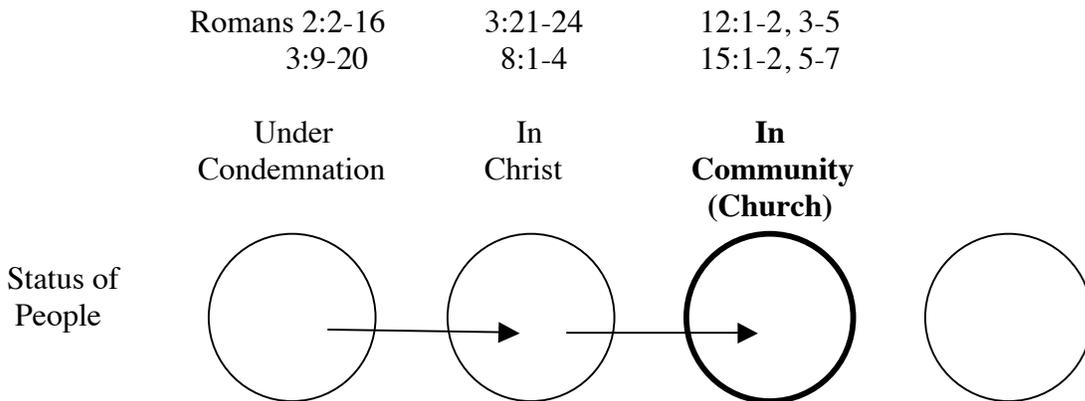
There is an amazing spiritual change in the person who has become a believer. Scripture explains that he or she has moved from darkness to light, from death unto life, from the wrath of God to peace with God, from being outside God’s family to becoming a member. However, the new believer at this time of change is described as a “babe in Christ.” Babies, whether physical or spiritual, are expected to grow, and the process of growth takes some time. New spiritual babies, whether they are young or old in years, require a lot of nurture and care. They begin with a diet of milk and eventually progress to more substantial food, such as meat. There is the need for education in order for them to know God, who He is and what He has done. Training in the ways of heaven as well as guidance in the appropriate behaviors for earth must be provided. A shield of protection from the temptations and pressures of evil must be set up.

Spiritual Growth Means to Become Like Christ

The goal is for the new believer to shed the influences and ways of the world and to begin to live the Christ-like life. Paul said, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Romans 8:29 indicates that God “predestined (the believer) to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.” In Ephesians 4:22-24 Paul wrote, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Spiritual Growth Takes Place in the Community of Believers

This kind of growth in spirituality is possible only in the context of the community of believers, in other words, in the fellowship of the local church. Therefore the next stage emphasizes the importance of community and fellowship within the local church:



Believers Help Each Other Become Spiritual Mature

Paul provides some wonderful illustrations about life with other believers: “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Paul went on to say that “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us,” and that we are to use our gifts for the common good (see I Corinthians 12:1-30). Believers are to “build each other up” and to “have a spirit of unity” and to “accept each other.”

In Ephesians Paul described God's people as a "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" (Ephesians 2:19-21). In Ephesians 4:11-16 we read that the goal is for the body of Christ to "be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature." The standard of maturity is in verse 13: "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ!" In verse 16 Paul tells us that "from Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament (that means every individual believer!), grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

What is the Most Important Goal for the Leader of the Local Church?

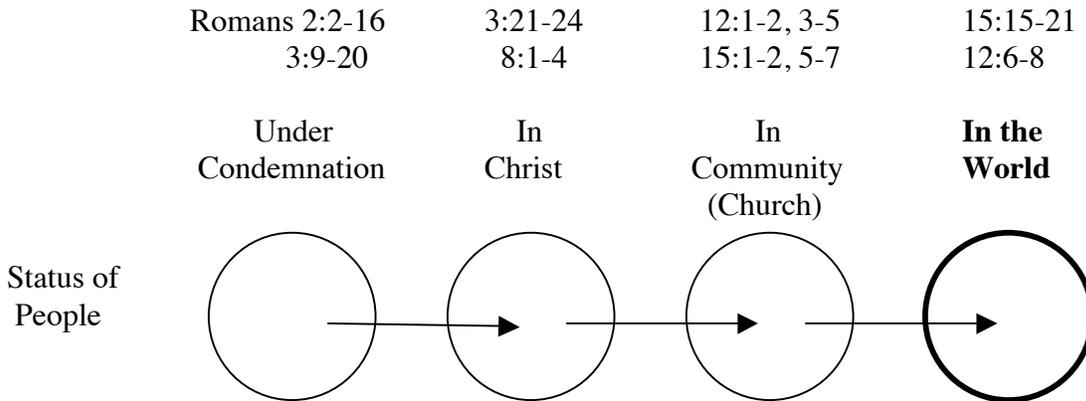
Most church leaders are happiest when the internal problems of their fellowships are at minimum levels! They assume that spiritual forward progress is measured by freedom from the problems of disunity, or when members do not argue and gossip among themselves, or when most of the members cooperate with and help each other, even if reluctantly, and when the members are not overly obsessed with worldly desires and attitudes. The standards held by many church leaders are not exactly the same as the standards of spiritual maturity described in Scripture: "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13)!

Too many church leaders are convinced that Paul's descriptions of "body life" (life in the church) are idealistic and unattainable. The reality is that most church fellowships do not do a very good job of developing people in the third stage. Even more unfortunately, most church fellowships do not even think beyond the third stage. However, Scripture is very clear that there is another stage for at least some believers, and that the local church has a responsibility to move some believers on to that fourth stage.

What Goal for the Church Does Jesus Christ Have?

The church does not exist to only protect its members from worldly influences. It exists to be a lighthouse in the darkness of the world. The church exists to take the truth about the living God to people who do not yet know the truth. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commanded His disciples to "go and make disciples of all people groups." In Romans chapter 15 Paul reminded his readers "of the grace God gave him to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God." A few verses later Paul wrote, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known" so that "Those who were not told about Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."

The process of spiritual maturity is not complete until there are believers who, like Paul, move into the fourth stage:



Jesus Wants His Followers to Be His Witnesses Everywhere

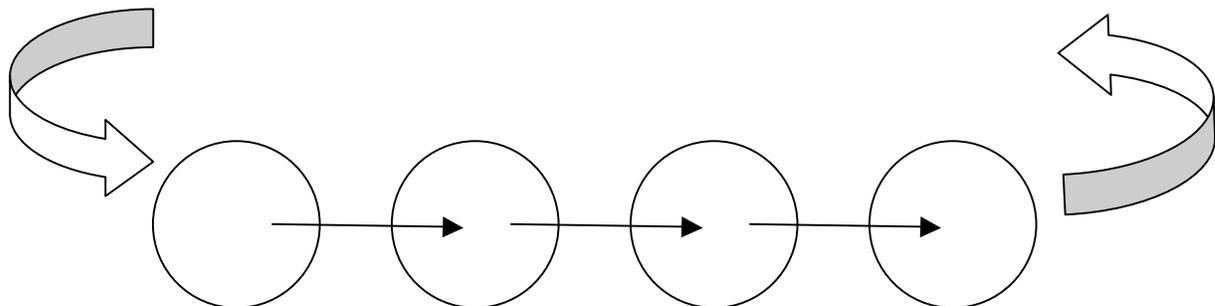
Yes, our citizenship as believers is in heaven, but our work as the servants of God and the followers of Jesus Christ is on this earth; literally, all over this earth — both across the street and around the world. The work of the Church in general, and the work of the local church in particular, requires that its members go to the places where spiritually needy people live. The last statement made by Jesus to His disciples was “You will be My witnesses in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A few hours before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His Father, “My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one. ... As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18; see also John 20:21).

Jesus Wants His Witnesses To Be Qualified For Their Work

Jesus said that He would build His Church on earth, and to do this He requires His followers to be spiritually mature and to be willing to engage with non-believers whether they live across the street or around the world. The process we have been describing begins with “new birth” into God’s family and does not end until mature believers are sent as God’s representatives Into the World.

The Process We Have Been Describing Is a Cycle

I hope you recognize that the believer who is sent into the world as the bearer of good news goes to people who are Under Condemnation. In other words, the process we have been describing is actually a cycle or loop: non-believers become believers and, after a period of growth and development, eventually they become witnesses to other non-believers.

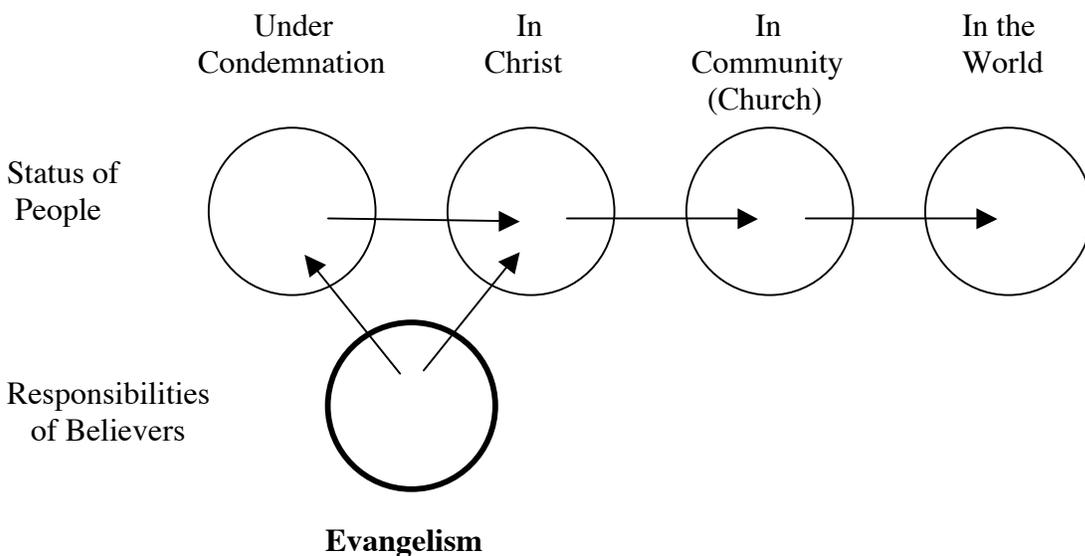


The Role of the Local Church In the Process

I also hope you recognize the important role of the local church in this process. God’s kingdom on earth will expand when each individual local fellowship fulfills its responsibility and contributes to the process. In this next section I want to focus of the responsibilities of believers in this process. At each stage in the process, there are specific responsibilities that individual church members and leaders have.

The Work Begins With Evangelism

For example, when presenting the good news to a non-believer, the believer is an evangelist. An evangelist is concerned about the salvation of the person who is Under Condemnation. The evangelist wants his or her listener to experience spiritual peace In Christ. Before the condition of the non-believer changes from death to life, before he is ready to “profess with (his) mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in (his) heart that God raised Him from the dead,” he must meet someone with “beautiful feet” who will “bring good news” (Romans 10:14-15). We can illustrate the responsibility of the believer this way:

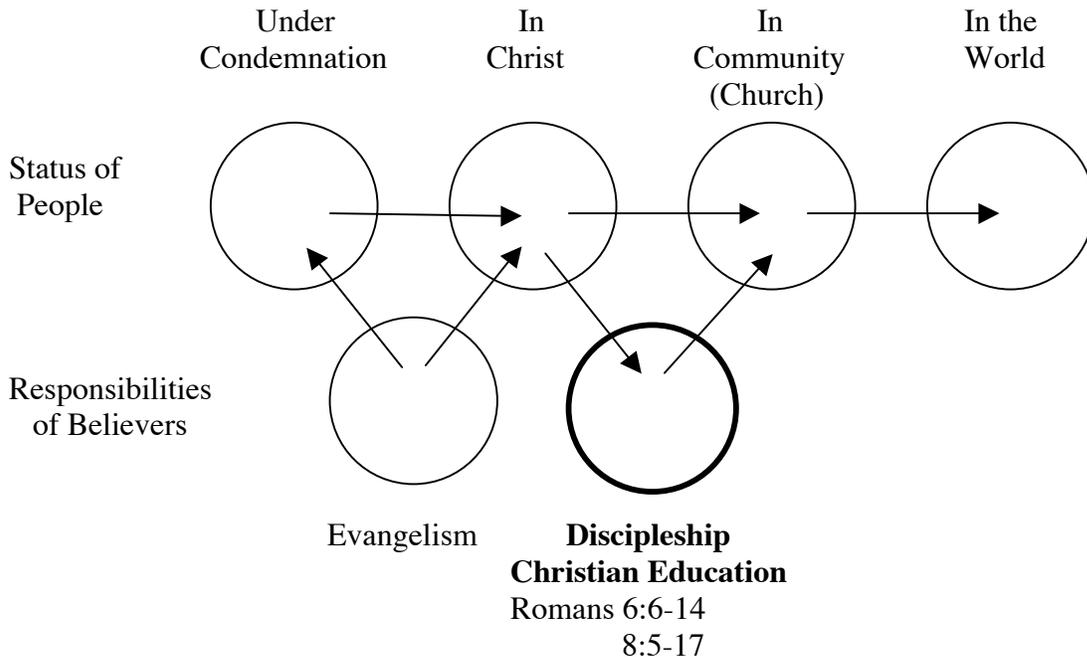


The Work Continues With Discipleship

After a person experiences spiritual new birth, that new “baby in Christ” must be nurtured and cared for by believers who are qualified to serve as spiritual parents. The new believer must be guided and disciplined. The new believer must learn new ways of living in this evil world and adopt new attitudes toward God, self, and others. He or she must understand about sanctification; that “we died to sin” so “how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:2) He or she must recognize that “all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:3-4).

As mature believers, “we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6), but new believers need to understand the significance of this truth. Parents care for and train their children. Spiritual parents must likewise nurture their spiritual offspring.

The important third stage is where a new believer becomes strong in his faith:



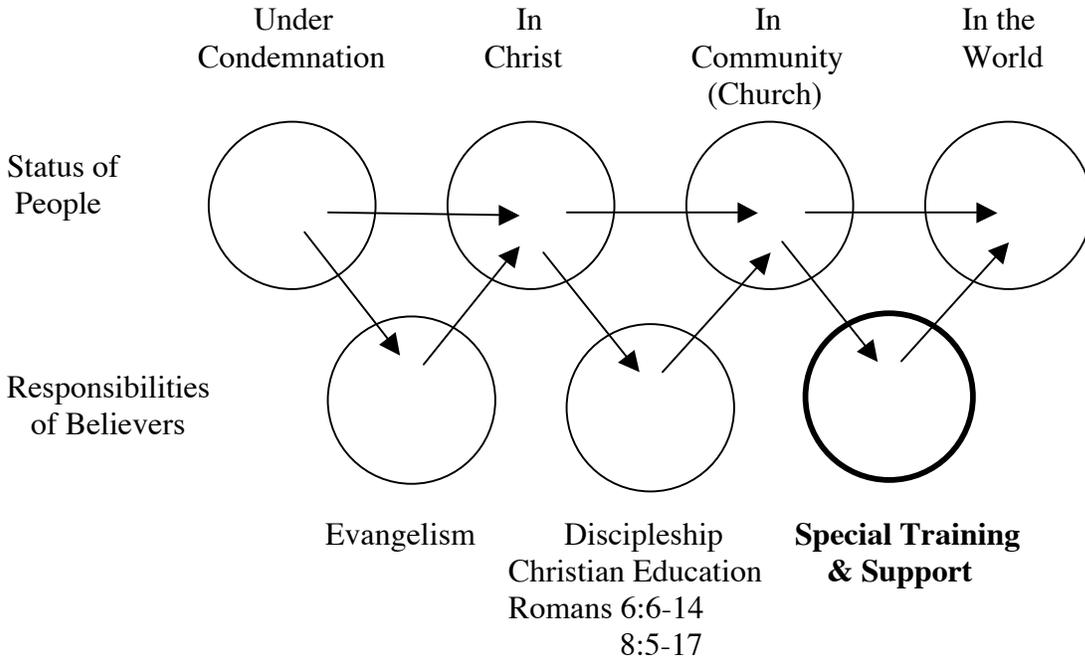
Discipling is Important But There is Still Another Responsibility

The successful development of a baby until he or she reaches the maturity of adulthood gives both biological and spiritual parents a satisfied and wonderful feeling. In the process of development, spiritual guardians must give the individual who is new in the faith opportunities to discover and learn the truth of God’s Word, and to discover and practice the unique gifts and abilities provided by the Holy Spirit. The disciplines of the Christian life must be communicated to and internalized by the new believer. The discipling and modeling activities of spiritual guardians are essential to the process of growth and becoming mature. However, the personal discipling of a new believer is still not the end of the responsibilities of local church members.

God seeks laborers to go into His harvest fields, and He selects and separates out a number of His followers for special ministry assignments among the unreached people groups of earth. If the believers who are called for one of these special assignments are to become successful laborers in the harvest fields assigned to them, they will require specific training and support. It is the responsibility of the members of the local church to help with the preparation process and to help provide the resources to send God’s special laborers on their way.

Ministry Skills Are Developed In the Context of the Local Church

I think that it is obvious that ministry skills are developed in the context of the local church. Ministry skills require “head knowledge” (learning) but a skill is developed only through practice and practical experience (doing). The local church has the wonderful opportunity to help its “called out” members gain practical experience through a period of basic training and apprenticeship — through “on-the-job” training. In addition, when the time comes for the missionary to depart for the field of service, the other members of the fellowship have the opportunity to encourage, pray for, and financially support that individual.



A Biblical Example of Our Topic

The best example in Scripture of a missionary-minded sending church fellowship is the church of Antioch. The story of this fellowship is in Acts chapters 11, 13, and 14. When the Jewish converts in Jerusalem were “scattered by persecution in connection with (the martyrdom of) Stephen, some of them traveled as far as ... Antioch ... and began to speak to Greeks, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.” The people they taught were called “disciples,” and those disciples were called Christians (Acts 11: 19-26).

In these verses we learn that some of the Jewish converts traveled to a city some distance from Jerusalem and evangelized among Gentile people (stage 1). Barnabas himself was an evangelist there. The status of many of the Gentiles changed from being Under Condemnation to being In Christ (stage 2). At that point, the need for spiritual training became so great that Barnabas enlisted the help of Saul, and together they “met with the church and taught great numbers of people.” Literally, they “discipled” the new believers at Antioch (stage 3). Barnabas and Saul gained a lot of experience during the year of teaching and training others, and undoubtedly developed their ministry skills to the point where they were later effective and productive workers in their “harvest field.”

The story then jumps to chapter 13. “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers,” including Barnabas and Saul. These were men who were recognized for their maturity, spiritual gifts, and leadership abilities. “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting (two of the spiritual disciplines) the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (stage 4). “So after they had fasted and prayed, they (the others) placed their hands on them and sent them off.” Barnabas and Saul departed for Cyprus, “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit,” and the following verses in chapters 13 and 14 indicate that they successfully evangelized and taught in several locations.

In Acts 14:21-28 we read a summary of their activities. In this summary we can notice the four stages of their ministry efforts. “They preached the good news” (they evangelized); “they won a large number of disciples” (many people became believers); “they strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith” (they taught and trained); “they appointed elders in each church” (they acknowledged the gifting and calling of qualified men by the Holy Spirit); “they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work” (they were accountable to those who had sent them out and supported them); “they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them” (everyone in the church in Antioch was a valuable member of the team and God had used the entire fellowship in accomplishing His purposes).

God Accomplishes His Purposes Through His Church

God works through individuals as evangelists, but He works through His body of believers to identify, nurture, build up, train, and support those who take the good news of Jesus Christ into the world.

We can end this booklet by referring back to information that was presented in chapter 1. Much of the information in that chapter was from Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 3:10-11 we read that it was God’s intent “that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” As leaders of the many local churches in Nepal, we must endeavor to make the Church all God wants it to be. When it comes to the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth, the local church is a vital component in God’s plan.

May God guide you as you continue to guide others in the process toward spiritual maturity and effective missionary service.