

## The Goals of Equipping

By T.M. Moore

### **WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?**

Much of what we do in the church in the name of equipping seems to have the character of guesswork. We guess that the programs and activities that we sponsored last year were good enough, so we will just repeat them in the year to come. We guess that the curriculum writers know best about making disciples, and that their materials are designed to accomplish that task, so we will just use their stuff for our Sunday school and Bible studies. That program seems to have worked well over at such-and-such church, so we guess it will go OK here, too. And because most of the people keep coming back for more of those programs and more of that material year after year, we guess we must be doing what we are supposed to, so why change anything?

But when do we ever get to the place where we ask the hard questions about goals? Equipping that is left to guesswork will only leave us guessing about the kind of results we might be achieving. Can any of us imagine the Lord Jesus Christ taking such a tack in the training of His disciples? Hardly. He knew what they were supposed to become. He had a clear vision of what the results of their discipleship should be. He devoted Himself to the kinds of carefully prepared, consciously devised equipping activities that would be most likely to produce the results He sought. And He carefully evaluated the progress of their development at various places along the way.

As Francis Schaeffer, David Wells, Stephen L. Carter, and others have shown, our “guesswork” approach to equipping the people in our congregations has been less than effective. Instead, we have a church that is doctrinally weak, spiritually feeble, socially and culturally marginalized, and susceptible to every wind of doctrine, every cunning and deceitful scheme that postmodern man might be able to devise.

Surely our equipping efforts deserve the same kind of thoughtful, goal-oriented planning and execution that the Lord Jesus demonstrated. But what should the goals of our equipping be?

### **WHAT ARE OUR GOALS?**

In Ephesians 4:11-16, the Apostle Paul recommends two general goals for the church’s work of equipping the saints. The first is that the saints of God might be fitted for the work of ministry and the second is that the congregation as a whole might grow in unity and maturity. Let’s examine each of these equipping goals in more detail.

“For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.” This, it would seem, could hardly be plainer: Pastors and teachers and those who serve with them in leadership roles (1 Corinthians 16:15,16) are to provide the kind of equipping that results in the saints of God doing works of ministry. Whatever we do in our preaching, teaching, and training, the first goal must be to give the members of our churches the equipment they need in order to serve the Lord in ministry to others. And if we are not thinking *in fairly specific terms* about what works of ministry we are trying to prepare the saints to perform, then our equipping efforts will be driven merely by the process - the actual work that we do in these activities— instead of by the results— what we hope to achieve in the lives of those we teach.

Believers who have been equipped for ministry express a discipleship that is characterized by serving others in love, after the example of our Lord Jesus Himself (John 13:1-15). By their works of mercy and help; their words of encouragement, comfort, counsel, instruction, and witness; and their labors together with other believers in joint endeavors of all kinds, those who have been diligently and effectively equipped show that the labors of their teachers have not been in vain. Such a ministering way of life - a life of Christ-like love manifested in the normal contexts of everyday life— flows out of the confluence of biblical affections, biblical understandings, and biblical patterns of behavior that have been self-consciously and faithfully inculcated, nurtured, and developed through the various works of equipping to which such disciples have been subjected (1 Timothy 1:5). For this to happen equipping will have to be both designed *to accomplish* such results and faithfully *evaluated* as to its effectiveness in so doing.

The need today is for equippers at all levels in the church to think more pointedly and more prayerfully, not just about their own work of preaching and teaching, but also about the ministry opportunities and callings of the disciples they are called to equip. In this way they may fashion their instruction so as best to help those disciples in making the most of those opportunities for the cause of Christ and His Kingdom (Ephesians 5:15-17).

“Until we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a mature man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Jesus Christ.” Here is the second goal of our equipping, that whole congregations should be nurtured in biblical church growth defined in terms of unity and maturity as Paul outlines these ideas here (Ephesians 4:13-16). Making disciples who minister to others in love is not our only objective in the work of equipping. We must also work consciously and consistently to promote healthy, growing churches as the fruit of our labors.

Here we can only be brief. Paul says that the end of the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry is that we might *all together attain* a kind of unity and

maturity that distinguishes our church, as a whole, more and more as a genuine expression of the Body of Christ. Every church—no matter how large or small, whether young or old, rural, suburban or urban, or whatever its prospects for reaching the lost—can grow in unity and maturity as Paul explains them here.

By growth in unity we seek to arrive together at greater and greater levels of confessional agreement, vision for ministry, commitment to one another, involvement in one another's lives, and fruit of Christian assurance. By growth in maturity we strive together for greater discernment, more consistent speaking of God's truth in love—both inside the church and in the surrounding community—a higher involvement of more and more members of the local congregation in works of ministry according to their gifts and opportunities, and both qualitative and quantitative increase in the life and ranks of the church as a whole.

## **TWO GENERAL GOALS**

We must think of these two general goals—ministering saints and healthy, growing churches—as the sights of a gun, both of which must be carefully lined up with a clearly defined target before we can expect that any expenditure of resources of energy in equipping will be worthwhile. This comes down to how we plan our equipping efforts and how we assess their actual effectiveness in accomplishing the ends we seek. Every church should have in place resources, guidelines, and procedures for helping her equippers know how to define proper goals, and then to work for results. And every church must also take the time to evaluate its progress in achieving these two goals of the equipping process. Scripture urges the shepherds of God's flock to "look well to know the state of your flocks" (Proverbs 27:23). If we devote our energies in equipping more to our preparations and presentations than to what should be happening in the lives of our students and in our church, then we cannot be said to be fulfilling this most important responsibility. We are concentrating on the *process* of equipping more than on the results, *and* our labors will continue to be disappointing.

In one of the World Series games of the late 'fifties, Hank Aaron came to the plate at a critical moment. Yankee catcher Yogi Berra, always the card, told him that he'd better be careful because he didn't have the label of the bat up. He might break his bat. Aaron said simply, "I didn't come up here to read," and hit the next pitch out of the park. Focus on results first *and* process as the means to achieving the ends we seek, rather than as the ends themselves.

When it is time for us to give an accounting of our ministries, we upon whom greater condemnation will fall (James 3:1) must not be satisfied merely with having done "the best we could." Rather, we must strive by all the means at our disposal to be able to say with the Lord Jesus Himself, "Behold, I and the

children whom God has given me” (Hebrews 2:13), pointing, as Paul did (2 Corinthians 3:1,2; 1 Thessalonians 2:19,20) to those whose lives have been transformed and churches enriched as a result of our works of equipping.

Let’s take the guesswork out of equipping and begin to pursue this important ministry with the biblical goals of ministering saints and healthy, growing churches as our conscious and determined objectives.

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### **Questions for probing:**

- 1 Examine that part of your church’s mission statement that deals with Christian education, equipping, and training. Discuss that among the group for clarity.
- 2 Does our definition and mission description help us to focus our energies and resources on good goal setting in education and training?
- 3 What do we need to do in our church to direct our energies and efforts toward training our people for ministry?
- 4 Do the leaders, including Sunday school teachers, committee members, Bible study leaders, etc. Understand our goals in equipping and discipling?
- 5 Do you agree or disagree with the article’s conclusion about equipping for ministry? Discuss your reasons.
- 6 Are you as leaders poised to do significant evaluation of your church’s ministry efforts?

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