

THE CHURCH INVITES EVERYONE INTO THE FAMILY

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. – Matthew 28:19

Like everything else about God, God's love is infinite. It overflowed the Trinity to Adam and Eve. It overflowed Israel to the Gentiles. And it overflows his adopted family, the church. God's love invites every person on earth to join his family. The third purpose of the church is to extend that invitation.

What if your people learn to effectively invite their friends and neighbors to join God's family, and the friends and neighbors respond? On Pentecost morning there were 120 Christians in the world. Then the Holy Spirit fell, and three thousand people joined the church in one day (Acts 2:41). What if that happens to your church? Will your people know what to do? What if the revival we all pray for starts tomorrow?

I think it's entirely possible that God will turn all the upheaval in the Middle East and elsewhere to open people's hearts for a spiritual harvest like the world has never seen. Praise the Lord for the harvest - but who is going to care for all these new Christians?

The only ones who can care for new Christians are those who are Christians already. If real revival comes, there won't be enough pastors to personally

disciple every new believer. You have to equip your people to do it (Ephesians 4:12). Motivate them. Give them confidence. Train them to carry God's presence in love and power to everyone they meet. Equip your people to be the church and have church any time, any place, with anybody. Then God can send revival, because he will know your people will be there for the new believers.

If you are a church leader, ask your pastor to equip you this way. Then step out in faith and try new things. From the very beginning, this is the main way the church has spread.

Acts 8 tells the story. I call it the four-stroke engine that powers kingdom growth. Let's take a look at it.

The Four-Stroke Engine that Powers Kingdom Growth

Stroke 1: Ordinary Christians spread the word of Jesus wherever they found themselves

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. – Acts 8:1, 4

Until the day this persecution began, almost every Christian in the world lived in Jerusalem. It was the nursery of the new-born church. But the time came when God decided his people had been watching the apostles long enough.

I remember the first time I noticed exactly who went out and started preaching the good news about Jesus. I had just assumed it was the apostles. But look again at verse 1. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. **It was all the ordinary Christians**, the same ones who ran from the persecution and scattered all over the countryside. They're the ones who told everybody about Jesus.

This wasn't a mission trip. They didn't start out to preach. I think it happened something like this: Imagine a Jewish believer named Jon hears that his friend Ike has been thrown in jail for being a Christian. Jon races home, grabs his wife and kids, and runs for the only place he can think of – Uncle Albert's house in Damascus. Jon and family show up at Uncle Albert's front door. Uncle Albert asks to what he owes the pleasure of this unexpected visit. Jon says he's being persecuted for following Jesus. Uncle Albert says, "Who's Jesus?" And Jon and his family tell him the good news.

Ordinary Christians – not apostles, not prophets, not evangelists or pastors or teachers, just plain everyday believers – spread the word of Jesus wherever they found themselves. Do you have any ordinary Christians in your church? Train them to do the same.

Stroke 2: Ordinary Christians did the works of Jesus wherever they found themselves

Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. – Acts 8:5-8

There's no indication that this Philip was anything other than an ordinary everyday Christian. There was a Philip among the seven chosen to run the food ministry in Acts 6, but even if it was the same person, that doesn't imply miraculous powers. We do know this is not Philip the apostle, because all the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. **So how did he do these miracles? The same way Jesus did: by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

By the way, it's extremely unlikely that Philip went to Samaria all by himself. He certainly would have taken his family with him, and probably others came along as well. People fleeing persecution almost always go in groups. Philip was most notable, but we can be sure other ordinary Christians, so ordinary

that their names are not even recorded, were doing the same kinds of things.

We've already seen that **Spirit-powered actions are a part of imitating Jesus**. Jesus himself promised it twice, before his death and after his resurrection. In John 14:12 he told his followers, *I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father*. In Acts 1:8 he told them how it would happen: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*. A few years later Paul wrote about miracles as a normal part of church life (see 1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

Again, Philip and the other believers didn't set out to do miracles. They were running for their lives. But when people started asking why they had left Jerusalem, they told about Jesus. A big part of the story was how Jesus healed the sick, at first in person, and later through the apostles using Jesus's name. There are sick people everywhere, and I'm sure some of them said, "Can Jesus heal me, too?" So Philip, probably scared to death, remembered what he had seen the apostles do, and he did the same. And God responded with healings and miracles.

Ordinary Christians – not apostles, not prophets, not evangelists or pastors or teachers, just plain everyday believers – didn't stop with talking about Jesus. They did the works of Jesus wherever they found themselves. Train the ordinary Christians in your church to do the same.

Stroke 3: Ordinary Christians taught and cared for the resulting new believers

A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. . . . But now the people believed Philip's message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went. – Acts 8:9, 12-13

Philip didn't leave Jerusalem with the goal of planting a church, but now here

he was with a bunch of new believers on his hands asking, “**We believe in Jesus, now what do we do?**” Again, Philip did what he’d seen the apostles do in Jerusalem. First he baptized them. Then he started teaching them and helping them learn to imitate Jesus.

When my son John was in college he decided to visit Cambodia. He found a church in Cambodia, asked if they would be his local connection, bought a plane ticket, and took off. He thought he would just be kind of a Christian tourist, visiting churches and getting a taste of what it’s like to follow Jesus in southeast Asia. They had a different idea. They thought he had come to teach them more about Jesus and the Christian life, and they wouldn’t take no for an answer. So John reached back in his memory to what he had learned from sermons and Sunday School and watching his father the preacher, and he talked about those things. And God used him.

Philip and the other scattered believers did the same thing. They told people what they had learned from the apostles. When somebody showed special interest, like Simon the sorcerer, they taught them more. **When you suddenly find yourself taking care of a baby you do whatever you can, whether you feel qualified or not.** Spiritual babies should be no different.

Ordinary Christians talked about Jesus and did the works of Jesus. When people responded, ordinary Christians helped them start learning about God and becoming like Jesus. The ordinary Christians in your church can do it, too. Encourage them and let them know you believe in them.

Stroke 4: The existing church guided and supported the new groups

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there. As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit. . . . After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter

and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News. – Acts 8:14-17, 25

Ordinary Christians spread the word, did the works, and cared for those who responded. But the existing church didn't leave them on their own. As soon as they heard about a group of new Christians, **experienced church leaders stepped in to offer support and guidance.** They spent some time ministering, filling in what was missing and making sure the new church was well grounded. Then they went back home, and probably from there out to help and support other newly forming churches.

Notice the balance here. Philip and the other ordinary Christians told people about Jesus, ministered in various ways including healings and miracles, and taught and cared for the new believers. They didn't wait for the apostles and pastors and officially recognized church leaders to do those things. They recognized that **acting like Jesus in these ways is just part of what it means to be a Christian.** Peter and John encouraged this initiative and blessed it. But they balanced that encouragement with further instruction and oversight.

You need to maintain the same balance. Encourage your people to step out in faith to spread the word, do the works, and minister to the people who respond to them. But keep an eye on things. It's easy for eager lay people to make a variety of mistakes ranging from Bible interpretation to personal relationships - or they may just not know what to do. **As pastor you must always be ready to step in before ignorance or mistakes turn into problems.** That's why solid training in the Bible, theology and church history and in the practical matters of ministry is so important. By the same token, always be ready to receive guidance and correction yourself, whether it's through an official structure or an informal group of other pastors.

The engine in a car generates power by repeating the four strokes over and over: intake fuel and air, compress fuel and air, combust the explosive mixture, exhaust the fumes; intake-compress-combust-exhaust- intakecompresscombustexhaust-intakecompresscombustexhaust...

The kingdom of God grows the same way: tell the good news, do the works

of Jesus, teach new believers, support the new group; tell-do-teach-support-tell-doteachsupport-tell-doteachsupport...

As an engine starts you can see the four steps. As it speeds up the details begin to blur. It's the same way with kingdom growth. We see the four steps clearly in the first half of Acts 8. It repeats in the second half of the chapter as Philip goes to Gaza. It repeats again in Acts 9:10-19 with Ananias in Damascus, and again in Acts 11:19-26 with unnamed believers in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. The details are not reported so clearly as the cycle repeats, but all the elements are there.

You can trace the cycle through history. In the 1500s the Reformation spread this way. In the 1800s the great expansion of the Methodist movement followed the steps. The recent expansion of the church in China and South America and Africa has followed the same cycle, as has the house church movement in the United States.

The Christian's Responsibility

Every Christian has a responsibility to carry God's presence in love and power to everyone they meet. Christians together have a further responsibility to be the church and be ready to have church any time, any place, with anybody. Pastors and other church leaders have a responsibility to equip, motivate and support their people to do these things.

Let's break that down a little.

Individual Christians have a responsibility

Every Christian should be a carrier of God's presence. What does that mean? When Peter and John were arrested for preaching Jesus, Acts 4:13 says,

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no

special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.

There was something about Peter and John that marked them as Christians. When the high priest came out of the holy of holies he had the smell of incense on him. People smelled it and knew he had been in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 2:15 says, *Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God.* Peter and John had something like a spiritual fragrance of Jesus about them. They carried God's presence. The spirits of the council members were able to detect it.

Jesus said, *I am with you always* (Matthew 28:20). God is always with us, but sometimes we're so much in the world that the signs of God's presence are covered up, like cigarette smoke covers up perfume. Teach your people what it means to *let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father* (Matthew 5:16). Teach them to carry the love and power of God's presence.

God is love (1 John 4:8). **To carry God's presence means to carry love.** Every interaction we have with other people, especially those who don't know Jesus, must demonstrate love – not judgment or criticism or fear or self-righteousness, but love. If people don't sense the love of God in you and from you, you aren't carrying God's presence.

But love that is powerless to help is empty sentiment. Jesus promised,

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. - Acts 1:8

To carry God's presence means to carry God's power. **The ministry of power is an essential part of carrying God's love to the world.**

What do I mean by the ministry of power? Doing the works of Jesus, as Philip did in Acts 8.

The night he was betrayed, Jesus told his disciples, *I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works,*

because I am going to the Father (John 14:12).

After his resurrection Jesus was more specific.

These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new languages. They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed. – Mark 16:17-18

Paul wrote,

My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. - 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 ESV

The Holy Spirit is a spirit of love (2 Timothy 1:7), so *demonstration of the Spirit and of power* means demonstrating God's love by using God's power. As your people carry God's presence in their everyday lives, God will lead them to opportunities to show God's love and power. It might be as simple as a smile. It might be listening to a problem, or offering to pray with someone. It might be helping in some other way. It might even be a miracle. The point is, **carrying God's presence in love and power is not something only pastors do. It's the responsibility of every Christian.**

Christians together have a responsibility

Individual Christians carry God's power, but when they are together that power is multiplied. Jesus promised, *Where two or three gather together in my name, I am there among them* (Matthew 18:20). Whenever any two or more of your people come together, whether it's in church or at home or if they just run into each other in the market, Jesus is there in a special way. Teach them to recognize and demonstrate that. Any two or more Christians should be

ready to be the church and have church any time, any place, with anybody.

Let's unpack that last sentence.

People ask me, "Where is your church?" They want to know the address of the building. I'll often answer, "It's Tuesday morning, so most of them are at work." The church is not a building, it's people.

Then what do I mean when I say your people need to be the church? The same thing you mean when you tell someone, "Be yourself." It means, remember who you are, and act like it.

Whenever two or more Christians are together, no matter the place or circumstances, they need to remember that they are the church, and act like it.

What does that mean? For me, two things: loving each other, and being available for God to use.

Jesus said, *Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples* (John 13:35). Love shows itself in ways that can be seen: respect, caring, helping each other. When people see two Christians together, the first thing they should notice is the love.

The second part of being the church is being available to God.

In the physical realm, when your hands want to do something, what actually does it? Usually, your hands or feet or mouth. Your head decides and plans, but your body makes it happen. In the spiritual realm Jesus is the head and the church is his body (Colossians 1:18). If Jesus sees something that needs to be done, he very rarely just does it himself. Miracles happen, but they're not the way God usually works. Jesus the head decides how to demonstrate his love, but most of the time he makes it happen through us, his body.

Let's say two of your people are eating in a restaurant. One of them notices that the server is acting very worried. She asks what's wrong, and the server breaks down in tears. Jesus wants to comfort and encourage her. Luckily, two members of his body are there, to be his mouth and his hands – your church folks. They speak kind words, perhaps lay a comforting hand on her shoulder, and offer to pray for her. They are being the body of Christ, the church.

Any two or more Christians should be ready to be the church by loving

each other and acting as the body of Christ.

Beyond being the church, Christians together should be ready to have church.

What if your people can't get to where your church meets? What if your building burns down, or there's a gasoline shortage, or terrorists start targeting church services? What if a great revival comes and the church buildings aren't big enough for all the people? Will your people know what to do? Do they have the confidence to invite their neighbors to join them in their house or in a lunchroom at work or under a tree, and have church?

Having church doesn't require a consecrated building, or a choir or band, or an ordained minister. These things can certainly make church better, but the first-century church didn't have any of them. Nor do many underground churches in places where Christianity is outlawed. Having church means two or more Christians spending time together in the name of Jesus. They can sing, they can pray, they can share what God is doing, they can read the Bible and talk about it. *One will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said* (1 Corinthians 14:26). Whenever Christians worship God together they're having church.

Pastors and church leaders have a responsibility

Pastor, your job description is very simple: **equip God's people to do God's work until they resemble God's Son** (Ephesians 4:12-13). Equip them as individuals to carry God's presence in love and power to everyone they meet. Equip them as small groups to be the church and have church anytime, anywhere, with anyone they meet.

Teach them what they need to know. Demonstrate what they need to do. Provide resources. Make opportunities for them to practice small steps in non-threatening settings, so they gain confidence. Tell them why it's important. Watch what they're doing, and give feedback and support.

Look for opportunities to move people into ministry. You might start by simply asking them to tell a small group how they came to know Jesus.

Depending on their talents, ask them to lead in prayer, or read Scripture, or lead a song. As they grow in the Lord, ask them to lead a group of some kind, or to become a shepherd for a small group of people, calling them if they miss church, caring for them and looking after them.

Always look for a chance to encourage your people and let them try bigger things.

Most important, soak your people in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to work these things in and through them.

My greatest thrill as a pastor is seeing someone realize that God can use them, and step out in faith and begin to do things for God. If they start doing things I have been doing, it frees me up to do other things. If they start doing new things, that multiplies the ways God can work through my church. Either way it's a blessing.

Points to Remember

- Most church growth comes, not through pastors, but through ordinary Christians who have been trained by pastors.
- Individual Christians have a responsibility to carry God's presence in love and power.
- Christians together have a responsibility to be the church and have church any time, any place, with anybody.
- Pastors and church leaders have a responsibility to equip the people for this work.