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**Making Your Church a Lay Seminary - Part 1**

By Freddy Davis

Probably one of the most difficult things for most churches is to develop a top notch discipleship training program. This would be a program that prioritizes the essential foundational elements every Christian needs in order to confidently and effectively express their faith in modern culture. But simply having a program is not enough. It must also catch the imagination of the entire congregation in a way that compels them to participate. Without both of these dynamics in play, precious little serious discipleship training will ever take place. And sadly, this is the situation most churches find themselves in. They don't prioritize this kind of training, and what they do offer does not catch the imagination of the majority of their members. There's a reason discipleship training opportunities tend to have the least amount of participation of all church programs.

**Great Resources**

The truth is, there are precious few discipleship resources that actually provide the kind of essential Christian discipleship knowledge that is able to comprehensively and systematically help believers navigate the increasingly anti-Christian society that we currently face. This is not to say there are no good resources out there. There certainly are. In fact, there are some very good ones, and my observation is in no way meant to minimize them. That said, most do not lay the kind of comprehensive foundation that is able to provide everyday Christians the tools they need to confidently go forth in ministry in our current societal environment.

But there is another element in play, as well. Even if the perfect resource existed, most people who self-identify as Christians are not willing to put in the time and effort necessary to gain proficiency in it. There are, of course, many dedicated Christians who are willing to put forth that effort, and they are definitely to be commended. But taking a big picture look, the percentage of self-identified Christians who actually put forth that effort is minuscule. The end result of this situation is that our churches end up having decreasing influence in our current societal environment. In fact, it is even less than we generally realize.

It cannot even be questioned now – American society is decidedly post-Christian. The values that dominate society unquestionably rest upon a relativistic foundation. It is a foundation where those who are in the most prominent positions of influence use their own personal preferences as their means of deciding and promoting moral values. This is true in every area of society: family, media, education, arts and entertainment, government, business, and, increasingly, even in the church.

There is only one way to turn this around. This is a spiritual problem and it requires a spiritual solution. American society has turned away from God and His ways, and returning right morality to society will require a reversal.

But a reversal like that won't just happen. It will require both the work of God in people's hearts, and the work of believers boldly sharing the message of salvation out in society. Of course, God doesn't require our participation to do what He does, and He sometimes does work in ways that don't directly involve the Christian faithful.

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But for the most part, He has chosen to work through believers to spread the message of salvation to the world. As such, it is critical that we be faithful to the task – and in order to effectively do that, we must equip ourselves for the work.

And this is where local churches become so critical. The simple fact is, while most church leaders have the opportunity to get a comprehensive, formal theological education, most "lay Christians" do not. As a result, they are relegated to sorting through the various random resources they come across, and must try to put them together as best they can into a comprehensive understanding of the faith. They do this by listening to sermons, reading Bible study lessons, listening to radio and TV preachers, reading books, and the like. These, of course, are not meaningless options. It is just that they are not systematic training opportunities, and individuals attempting to put it all together without some comprehensive plan more often than not results in a confused and incomplete understanding of their Christian faith.

To become equipped to confront the increasingly anti-Christian society that we now live in, we need more – and it is up to local churches to make it happen. Without that, we will continue to go down the road we are currently on.

### Right Mindset

But there is another matter that also needs to be addressed – one that very few people ever talk about. And perhaps that main reason it is not discussed is because it is outside of the thought processes of most Christians.

Throughout the years, there have been times when I have had occasion to take a personality test. Per-

haps you have done this, as well. Sometimes people take them in school, and it is also not that unusual for various organizations to give them to their employees. The purpose for taking them varies. Sometimes it is just to help people understand themselves better. Other times it is to help co-workers have more understanding or empathy for one another within an organizational setting. Regardless of the motivation, there actually are some quite valuable things that can be discerned by taking them.

My reason for bringing this up here, though, is that I believe thinking about this subject has relevance for the church as we consider discipleship training. It is not that we necessarily need to be taking personality tests, but, at the very least, understanding what these tests are getting at gives us some insight about how we ought to be operating as a church.

The truth is, people do have different personalities, and the different ones create very different dynamics within the lives of individuals. Some people are very "feeling" oriented. These folks tend to want to "feel" God working in their lives. Other people are more intellectually focused and oriented more toward studying and learning. Of course, everyone has both of these traits to some degree or another, but most people have an affinity one way or the other.

According to explanations I have read about the results of these personality tests, there are way more people who tilt toward the feeling side than the studying side. When it comes to the church, there are significant implications for this – and it probably explains one of the main reasons people gravitate more toward participating in worship services than in discipleship training opportunities.

Preaching services definitely lend themselves more to experiencing feel-

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ings as church attenders listen to wonderful teachings from a good preacher. On the other hand, the studying side takes a lot more effort.

Thinking about these tendencies objectively does not actually bring us to any kind of net positive or negative conclusion. It is just a description of the nature of our human existence. But the fact is, our lives are not about one or the other. To be a complete person we need to feed both sides of our lives. We are feeling persons and we want to have good feelings. But God, in creating us in His image, also made us to be self-conscious thinking persons. Every individual will naturally lean one way or the other, but no one will ever be a complete person without intentionally engaging both.

## Right Motivation

As critical as the two factors above are when it comes to implementing a powerful discipleship training program, there is a third that is even more critical – our motivation for doing ministry.

I grew up all my life hearing people talk about being "called into ministry." In almost every case, that expression is used as a means of designating particular people who feel God's leading into vocational Christian ministry. Even some pastors or evangelists, when giving an invitation at the end of a worship service, are sometimes known for saying, "If you feel called into ministry, come let us pray for you now" (referring specifically to people who feel God's leading into vocational Christian ministry).

Now doing that is certainly not a bad thing. People need to be challenged and encouraged to consider vocational leadership ministry. But that is an extremely limited understanding of what it means to be called into ministry.

Ministry is not something that is limited to vocational Christian leaders. In

fact, God calls EVERY Christian into full-time Christian ministry. The question is not, "Are you called into the ministry?" Rather, it is, "What ministry are you called into?" It is a matter of role rather than of whether or not a person is called. The primary role of vocational Christian leaders is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:11-13). The role of the "saints" (all of the other Christians) is to do the ministry out in the world.

Sadly, most "saints" don't recognize their calling. Instead of considering themselves ministers who do their ministry from the platform of some non-vocational Christian profession, they consider the vocational professionals to be the ministers, and themselves the ones who support the ministers. That is not a biblical understanding of ministry. And the work of God out in the world will continue to be limited until every believer embraces their role in ministry.

## Right Training

And this brings us back, once again, to the notion of discipleship training. If all believers are called into ministry, where are they to get their ministry training?

As mentioned before, most vocational ministers have the opportunity to get special training at a seminary or Bible school of some kind. But most Christians don't have that kind of opportunity. So where are they to get it? The right answer is, "They are to get it in their local church."

Having a ministry focus requires that we be equipped to carry it out. And that means that we need to be trained in the full range of the essential basics of our faith. So, just what does that involve? Every believer need to:

- have a solid grasp of the essential doctrines of their own faith,

- be able to confidently share their faith with others,
- be able to competently share with new believers how to get going in their new-found faith, and,
- be able to stand strong in the face of opposition.

Having a solid grasp of these things puts us in a position of being able to have an objective confidence in the validity of our faith.

In part two of this series, we will explore specifically what this kind of training should look like. But before that has any real value, we must have the more foundational elements firmly established in our lives – the things that have been discussed in this article. So, exactly where do you stand with them? What do you need to do to firm up these foundational elements in your life in order to be prepared for a solid discipleship training experience?

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