

The Training of the 12 to Start the Church

By Clark Blanchard

- *For what purpose did the 12 apostles think they were being trained?*
- *For what purpose was Christ actually training them?*
- *What can we learn from the training of the 12 that helps us understand the nature and role of the church?*

It is well-understood by students of the New Testament that when Jesus came to earth as the Messiah, He first offered the kingdom to Israel, which they subsequently rejected (Matthew 10:5, 6; 15:24; 16:21; 27:22-26). Simultaneously, He was planning to build His church and was laying the groundwork in the lives of the apostles (Matthew 16:18).

The training of the apostles during their time with Christ was not to run the kingdom of Israel but rather to launch the church. He had been preparing them for a task much different than they anticipated, for they were unaware of the church; they expected Him to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). The church was God's secret until launched at Pentecost and fully revealed through Paul (Ephesians 3:1-12).

The nature of the training they received reflected the nature that Jesus expected the church to have.

For example, if the nature of the church was to be a political force for social reform, then the disciples would have received training in politics and governmental affairs. If the church was to be organized in a centralized hierarchy, then Jesus would have given them skills in organizational structures and operations. If the church was to be structured into local independent organizations with their own hierarchy and rules, then He would have given them training accordingly. But His training of the 12 was much different.

If we comb through the gospel accounts, we will find His equipping of the 12 to have significant and surprising implications. He did not train them in politics, government, organizational operation or even what our culture would term local church planting and operation. He trained them in evangelism, discipleship (Matthew 28:19-20) and sacrificial service to an equal brotherhood (Matthew 23:11; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27). The training He gave the 12 conveys His vision of the "church" as much as or more than any other biblical teaching on the subject. His training included:

(1) The church is a spiritual brotherhood of service, not a religious hierarchy.

In Mark 10:35-45, James and John approached Jesus about their desire to have the places of authority immediately under Jesus. *Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on {Your} left* (verse 37). Of course this produced a predictable negative reaction from the other ten. *And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John* (verse 41). Jesus then seized the occasion for some revolutionary teaching. *But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many* (verses 43-45).

Nearly every church organizational hierarchy is patterned after the hierarchies of their surrounding Gentile cultures. This, of course, is why there are so many differing and conflicting forms of institutional church structures, regulations, and customs. The New Testament has no such teachings, so each group down through history has invented their own. Startlingly, Jesus taught the apostles, *But it is not so among you* (verse 43a). The apostles were not to concern themselves with an organizational hierarchy or authority among fellow believers but rather with serving fellow believers.

The "church" in any given geographical region is the believers (plural) in that region operating as a brotherhood serving one another for the mutual spiritual warfare. As in any family, the elder brothers have a special responsibility to the younger brothers. Anything more goes beyond the biblical definition and provision of the church.

(2) The church is an equal brotherhood with no special distinctions within the family.

In Matthew 23:1-11 Jesus again taught a radical concept to the apostles. He said that the scribes and Pharisees had placed themselves in the seat of Moses and were wielding the religious authority that went with it. The Mosaic order **did** have a hierarchy and levels of religious authority, such as Moses, Aaron, the Levites, high priests, and priests. As long as the apostles were part of the Mosaic system, they were to be subject to the hierarchy (verse 3).

Then Jesus taught His lesson. Not only was there to be no hierarchy among the apostles, but there was to be absolutely no spiritual titles among them as well. As specific examples of spiritual titles, Jesus cited “rabbi,” “teacher,” “father,” and “leader.” Today He might have added “Pastor,” “Reverend,” “Chairman,” or “President.” The principle behind this teaching is very instructive about the true nature of the church. He explained that all believers are to have the relationship of “brothers” (verse 8). The role He was preparing them for in the church was a family role not an institutional role. They were all spiritual brothers and their focus was to be one of serving. *But the greatest among you shall be your servant* (verse 11). Special spiritual clothing, places of spiritual honor, and special spiritual titles have no place in the believer’s life or the life of the church. The coming church age would be one of an equal brotherhood focused on glorifying and pleasing God by serving one another.

(3) The church is a herd of sheep cared for by Christ through the work of responsible older brothers.

In John 21:15-16 we find Christ’s primary concern prior to His ascension. It wasn’t the organization of the church, or its place in the community, or its political influence over the oppressiveness of Rome. His highest priority was the core issue of spiritual care of believers. His priority should be a clear indicator of the church’s purpose, thrust, and nature.

Three times He asked Peter, *Simon, {son} of John, do you love Me more than these?* Three times Peter answered, *Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.* And each time the Lord followed up with, *Tend My lambs, Shepherd My sheep, or Tend My sheep.*

(4) The Holy Spirit came to equip the church for its worldwide role.

Jesus’ final teaching to the apostles was given immediately prior to His ascension. In Acts 1:4-9 we read, *And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” {He said,} “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.*

Here we see the apostles still expecting the kingdom of Israel. But they had not been equipped for the kingdom of Israel; they had been equipped to begin the church age. Jesus had built into their lives the radically different concepts discussed above. They were an equal brotherhood of “nobodies” hierarchically, with neither an institution, physical facilities, formal theological training, official titles, special attire, nor religious position.

Instead, they had been trained to love, serve, and care for one another as brothers in a family. They were the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:19-22). Soon after, the Holy Spirit came and empowered them to carry the Gospel to the uttermost part of the world (Acts 1:8).

Questions and Answers

Q: *For what purpose did the 12 apostles think they were being trained?*

A: They thought they were being trained for positions of authority in the kingdom of Israel.

Q: *For what purpose was Christ actually training them?*

A: He was actually training them to start the church, which was God’s secret until Pentecost and later explained in detail by Paul.

Q: *What can we learn from the training of the 12 that helps us understand the nature and role of the church?*

A: Jesus trained the 12 to start the church. He provided no equipping in organizational skills, social or political reform, governmental or religious administration, nor even church planting. He allowed them no spiritual titles, special clothing, nor positions of honor. He equipped them to love, serve, and care for an equal brotherhood empowered by the Holy Spirit to evangelize and disciple worldwide.