

## **Children mature and go forth to establish new families: Does the same principle apply in the church?**

**By Bob Young**

God provides us families as places of nurture and growth. Marrying and establishing a new family unit gives a couple new opportunities for growing and becoming, both individually and together as a couple. Children are born into a family, and in the context of the family those children grow and mature and go forth to repeat the process of establishing new families.

Most Christian parents have a plan in mind for their children. They visualize the possibilities; they nurture and encourage their children to fulfill their God-given potential. Parents want their children to grow up and succeed. Parents have hopes and dreams for their children's education. Parents dream of their children getting married and having children. Parents expect their children to become self-supporting and move out of the house. Few parents plan to keep their children at home forever. Parents seek to nurture their children toward independence. Christian parents nurture their children toward spiritual and emotional health. We want our children to live their own lives within the will of God and the unique purpose that God has for them. They will establish new family units, independent families that become part of an extended family.

Now go with me to the church house. What can we learn? Why it is so difficult to understand and apply the same principles spiritually? The spiritual family exists to nurture family members. The church does not exist to raise satisfied, happy, dependent members. The church exists to mature disciples. We say it but we do not do it!

Christ is the one who gives the gifts that prepare Christians to be sent, to serve as evangelists, as prophetic persuaders, as shepherds and teachers. A local church eventually becomes saturated! There is little need for more leaders, even if gifted leaders have been matured and are available. Like a physical family, the church as the spiritual family must have a vision for developing children, maturing disciples who will leave home and establish new families.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16 in context. Church leaders exist to train and equip more church leaders for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ....so all reach maturity, more and more resembling Christ. The goal is to escape childhood and to train Christians who live out truth, exhibit love, and grow up in Christ, in self-edifying spiritual units or families. I know of few churches in the US that can accurately be described as self-edifying. Virtually all have developed a model that leaves the edifying to only a few—most often hired staff.

We have read these verses through the lens of the local church and have seldom considered that Paul is more likely referring to the church universal in a circular letter. The spiritual family exists to mature disciples and form more spiritual families. In many churches, the spiritual growth and maturity of members is stunted. There is no room for more leaders, more evangelists, more convickers and convicters, more teachers, more shepherds. Membership in the family (and faithful discipleship!) is defined by showing up at the table to be fed! Biblically, leaders are called to equip and send more leaders. The context implies more ministry in more places—new spiritual family units! Church planting—new churches! That is exactly what happened as the church at Ephesus spread into Asia Minor. And we wonder why growing churches is such a struggle!

Read Ephesians 4:11-16 again, perhaps in several different versions. Notice the words: equipping, facilitating, building up, unity, maturity, growing up, edifying itself. How long has it been since your local church has developed and disciplined members so that they were ready to be sent out, just as our children in our physical families, to minister according to their gifts in evangelism, persuading, teaching, and shepherding? How many Christians are being nurtured to become mature disciples, going forth to fulfill God's eternal purpose? How many are being matured with the idea that they will leave home as spiritual adults and establish new spiritual family units? How many churches have been planted by your local church, sending out mature disciples to establish new spiritual families?

Especially in the US, we have too often bought into the culture—bigger, even if not better! New, smaller churches grow rapidly. One of the most rapidly growing church groups in my area continually establishes new congregations, expecting that those congregations will reach 200-250 and then plant more congregations. The

early church grew through establishing more and more local churches. Cities usually had numerous smaller house churches, individual spiritual families, all of which were part of an extended spiritual family.

When I ministered in Michigan, I was active in the Michigan Missions Forum. During the dozen plus years that I served in Michigan, there were at least 14 new congregations established in the state. For the past 20+ years, my ministry context has been the state of Oklahoma. Today, it seems we spend a lot of time wringing our hands because smaller congregations, mostly in rural areas, are closing. People are moving to the cities. How many new congregations have been established to absorb and assimilate the growing population of the cities? I remember (about 30 years ago, in the early 1990s) reading an article that said more than 500,000 people would move into the northern DFW area within the next 10 years, by the year 2000. Included in the article were detailed plans that showed how the religious group that published the report planned to establish 500 new churches in that area within the 10-year period. (It wasn't my religious group!)

The mission works that are growing most rapidly across Latin America today are establishing new churches everywhere a group of believers can be found. That the church in Guatemala today has many members in locations scattered all across that nation is the result of initial mission work that established churches everywhere possible, and helped those new churches reach out in their own areas and regions. An effective work in Honduras establishes a new church, with the expectation that the church will grow and then establish another church nearby. A local church applying the principles of Ephesians 4 will not exist very long before it is actively establishing and maturing another local church. The infant Philippian church sent financial mission support to help establish more churches within a few months of its establishment.

May God give us wisdom! What does the Bible say? What is the biblical model for taking the gospel to our communities and to the world, for mission work, for church planting, for evangelistic missionary churches, for maturing disciples in self-edifying spiritual families? When will we become serious about doing what the Bible says, maturing disciples, sending forth "our children" to establish new spiritual families?