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THE CHURCH RAISES GOD'S CHILDREN

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. – *Ephesians 5:1*

Every Christian is a child of God, adopted into the family (John 1:12). As pastors and church leaders, the second part of our job is to help these children of God grow up to be like their Father.

As a little boy I imitated my father. On the playground I imitated sports heroes. In the high school band I imitated great saxophone players. As a young pastor I imitated famous preachers. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's also the first and best way to learn anything that goes beyond mere head knowledge.

But we can't see God. Most of the things we think of God doing are things that we can't do, at least not on our own. So how are we supposed to imitate God?

Being Like God Means Being Like Jesus

The Bible says Jesus is a perfect picture of God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Jesus himself said, *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father* (John 14:9).

Paul wrote, *I imitate Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1). We imitate the Father by imitating his son, Jesus. The word “Christian” means “little Christ.”

Ephesians 4 gives a job description for pastors and other church leaders.

Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. . . . growing in every way more and more like Christ. –Ephesians 4:12, 13, 15

In other words, **equip God's people to do God's work until they resemble God's Son.**

The more people become like Jesus, the more they become like the Father. The second purpose of the church is to help people do that. **The real measure of a church is not how big it is or how famous the pastor is, but how much the people are like Jesus.**

At this point somebody is thinking, “Wait a minute. How can I be like Jesus? Jesus is God. I’m just a human being. It’s unreasonable to expect me to be like him.”

In my opinion, this is one of the most important points we need to get across to our people. Yes, Jesus was and is God. Your people must clearly understand that. But it is not unreasonable of God to demand that we become like him – because when he came to earth, he became like us. So your people must also understand that Jesus did not do his miracles through his own divine power, but through the Holy Spirit. And every Christian has that same Holy Spirit.

Jesus did what he did through the power of the Holy Spirit

Jesus' miracles did not come about through any inherent power he brought with him from heaven. Philippians 2:5-7 says,

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.

When Jesus left his throne in heaven to begin his cosmic rescue mission, he left all his divine powers behind. The Bible says he emptied himself. He didn't bring anything extra with him from heaven. He became a human baby in a human womb, just like every other human being who has ever been born.

For the first thirty years of his life, that's how Jesus lived. The one difference is that Jesus never sinned. But God knew that wasn't going to be enough for what Jesus came to do. So Luke 3:21-22 tells us, *One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove.*

Jesus was still fully human, but now he had something extra. He had the Holy Spirit.

This was not an unprecedented thing. The Holy Spirit had come on people throughout the Old Testament. In Psalm 51:11 David prayed, *Don't take your Holy Spirit from me.*

Acts 10:38 says, *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*

The source of Jesus' miraculous power was not his deity. It was the Holy Spirit. The Bible doesn't say Jesus did good and healed people because he was God (even though he was). It says he did good and healed people because God was with him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's a fascinating verse in Luke 5:17. *One day while Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and teachers of religious law were sitting nearby. . . And the Lord's*

healing power was strongly with Jesus.

Notice that last phrase. Doesn't that imply that sometimes the Lord's healing power was not strongly with Jesus? Jesus' healing power was not inherent in him as a person. Jesus' miracles were dependent on the power of God, which came through the Holy Spirit.

When it comes to imitating Jesus, the first thing you need to teach your people is that Jesus did what he did through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every Christian has the same Holy Spirit Jesus had

The second thing your people need to know as they seek to become like Jesus is that the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus lives in their own reborn spirits.

Forty days after the Passover at which Jesus was crucified, he ascended into heaven. Ten days later, on the feast day of Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit on 120 of his followers, and the church was born.

Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. – Acts 2:2-4

The sound and the flames attracted a big crowd. They thought the house was on fire. Peter calmed them down, and then took the opportunity to preach.

When he finished, the Bible tells us, Peter's words convicted them deeply, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "*Brothers, what should we do?*"

Peter replied, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been

called by the Lord our God.” - Acts 2:37-39

The promise is to all of us. Your people need to understand: if they have turned from their sins and turned to God and been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, then **they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit**, because God always keeps his promises. Ephesians 1:13 says it very clearly: *When you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit.*^[1]

Let me ask you a question. How many Holy Spirits are there? Only one – the third person of the Trinity. If Jesus had the Holy Spirit, and you have the Holy Spirit, and there’s only one Holy Spirit, then guess what? You have the same Holy Spirit Jesus had. Your church members have the same Holy Spirit Jesus had. Every Christian has the same Holy Spirit Jesus had. Paul wrote, *The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you* (Romans 8:11).

Jesus became just like us, except that he had the Holy Spirit. But since Pentecost, every Christian has the Holy Spirit, too. That means every Christian can be like Jesus. What an exciting promise! Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in you, you can become more and more like Jesus.

What Was Jesus Like?

So what was Jesus like? What are we supposed to be teaching our people to become?

When I think of Jesus, several things come to mind. Like most people, I think of his godly character, his wise teachings, and his miraculous actions. As a pastor with a passion for the church, I also think of something else. It’s not quite as easy to describe, but I am struck by the way Jesus provided for the expansion of his kingdom by the growth of the church. And I’m struck by the fact that all four of these aspects of Jesus’ ministry were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-filled character

Jesus was always kind and loving and generous and patient. Sometimes it was “tough love” in hopes of opening some eyes, as when he talked to some Pharisees in Matthew 23, but it was always love. Jesus was the ultimate example of integrity and character.

Galatians 5:22-23 says this kind of character comes from the Holy Spirit. *The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

These are not just emotions that make us feel good. **These are ways we treat each other.** Every time I encounter another person I try to remember to start with this silent prayer: “Lord, please let me set the tone of this interaction with love, joy, peace...” and on through the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. I don’t always remember to start that way, but when I do, I can often tell the difference.

If the Holy Spirit could produce that kind of godly character in Jesus, he can do the same for us – if we will give him the same free reign in our lives that Jesus did. Teach your people to examine themselves for these signs of godly character.

Spirit-led wisdom

Jesus always knew just what to do or say. Maybe more importantly for some of us, he always knew what not to do or say. Jesus always made the right decision.

One of my favorite Bible stories is when Jesus got word that his friend Lazarus was dying (John 11). Everybody expected Jesus to drop everything and rush to Lazarus to heal him before he died. Instead, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days. The result was an even greater miracle. But how did Jesus know to do that?

This supernatural wisdom was not part of Jesus’ genetic makeup. It came from the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 5:8 says, *Even though Jesus was God’s Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.* Jesus had to learn to hear and

recognize and obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Every Christian is called to learn the same things. Romans 8:14 says it's a defining part of who we are: *All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*

Spirit-powered actions

When John the Baptist sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if he was really the Messiah sent from God, Jesus pointed to his miracles and healings (Luke 7:22). Supernatural actions proved who he was.

As we've already seen, Jesus didn't do these miraculous works through his own power or authority as the Son of God. He emptied himself of that when he left his throne in heaven. Jesus healed and performed miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:8 says that same power is available to every Christian. *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.* **Part of learning to be like Jesus is learning to allow the Holy Spirit to act through us in supernatural power.**

As a church leader, if you are not familiar with signs and wonders, make it a priority to find someone who is and learn from them. Invite your people to join you in studying and learning about these things.^[ii]

Spirit-impassioned multiplication

Jesus didn't try to do everything himself. The second half of Acts 1:8 says, *You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere - in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

That's a big mission. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime." Jesus knew that his mission would last beyond his lifetime, and the lifetimes of his followers. Two thousand years later, we still have not completed the task. So Jesus focused his three years of ministry on teaching and training. **Jesus was passionate about recruiting and equipping people to reproduce his life and work.**

At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus gave his disciples the job of reproducing themselves in others.

Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” – Matthew 28:18-20

We often act as if Jesus’ whole point was to get people saved and baptized. But that was just the beginning. Jesus went on, basically saying, “After you get them saved and baptized, don’t stop there. Teach them to do the things I taught you to do.”

The disciples taught Paul. Paul taught Timothy. And in 2 Timothy 2:2, he tells Timothy, *Teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.*

We can think of this as multiplication, or teaching, or discipleship. The word I keep coming back to is “reproduction.” It’s how a species survives. In the physical, God gave us a passion for reproduction. It’s been said that the church is always one generation away from extinction. We need to ask to Holy Spirit to give us a passion for spiritual reproduction as well.

God’s fatherly desire is that every human being will be like our big brother Jesus: filled, led, empowered and motivated by the Holy Spirit.

The Church: Nanny and Tutor

How do newborn Christians learn all this? What is God’s plan for helping them grow and develop in Spirit-filled character, Spirit-led decisions, Spirit-powered actions, and Spirit-impassioned reproduction? Who is the nanny for these baby Christians? Who is their tutor?

The church is their nanny and tutor. The older sisters and brothers take care of the younger ones. The more mature brothers and sisters teach the

less mature. And God oversees it all through us pastors and the other church leaders.

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. – Ephesians 4:11-13

You and I, the pastors, teachers and church leaders, are God's plan for raising his children. There is no Plan B.

It's a huge task. I believe three actions are at the core.

1. Teach your people to carry out Romans 12:1-2

Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. - Romans 12:1-2

When we become Christians, God makes our spirits new, but we still have the same bodies. We need to present them to God for his purposes. And we still have the same minds. We need to renew them with God's word. The first part of raising God's children is teaching them to do this.

Your people need to know that their bodies are important to God. What we do with our physical bodies has tremendous spiritual significance.

The world presents two false ideas about our bodies. The first false idea is modern materialism. It says that only the physical realm is real. Since your

body is physical, what it wants is all that counts. As the hippies used to say, “If it feels good, do it!”

The second false idea is dualism. This originated with the ancient Greeks, but it’s still popular today. Dualism says the spiritual realm is much higher than the physical, and only the spiritual will last into eternity. Since your body is just a lowly physical thing, whatever you do with it really doesn’t matter.

Both these ideas are wrong. And they both lead to the same place – dishonoring God by dishonoring our bodies.

Materialism is wrong because human beings are not just physical. We’re a unique and complex blend of the physical, psychological and spiritual realms – a trinity, like God, in whose image we were created. **God did not design our bodies to decide what we do, but to do what we decide.**

Dualism is wrong because God loves our physical bodies. He created them. He heals them when they get sick. He will make them new at the resurrection. God thought so highly of the physical human body that he sent Jesus to live in one. And when Jesus was resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven, he didn’t do it as a ghost. He did it in a physical human body (Luke 24:39).

Jesus presented his body to God in the ultimate obedience (Philippians 2:8). What we do with our bodies matters to God. To become like Jesus, teach your people to present their bodies to God.

But there’s another part of the human trinity that needs to be dealt with if we are to become like Jesus. **We need to change the way we think.** We need to renew our minds.

All of us have our minds shaped by the mish-mash of things we are exposed to by our families, our schools, our friends, our neighborhoods, the media, and everything else that makes up culture and society. A mind shaped by the world cannot understand the things of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).

When we become Christians, the Holy Spirit comes to live in our newly reborn human spirits, but our minds still speak the language of the world. Our minds have to be renewed. They have to learn a different perspective, a different value system, a different way of thinking.

This is not an automatic result of becoming a Christian. Our spirits are born again as a free gift of God, but we are the ones who have to present our bodies and renew our minds.

How do we renew our minds? We fill them with the word of God. We replace old thought patterns with Bible thought patterns. We replace old stories with Bible stories. We replace the world's values with God's values. We intentionally choose activities and entertainment that feeds and reinforces the things of God instead of the things of the world.

As your mind is renewed, it becomes more and more able to communicate with your spirit, more and more able to receive and understand the things of God. (See Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:18-19 – a great prayer for you to pray for your people.) Your mind becomes more and more like the mind of Jesus. To become more like Jesus, teach your people to renew their minds.

2. Teach your people to act on God's word

It's not enough to have God's word - you can have medicine in your cabinet, but just having medicine won't cure you. It's not even enough to believe God's word - you can believe medicine will cure you, but that belief won't do anything if the medicine stays in its bottle. If you want anything to happen, you have to do something. If you want to be cured, you have to get the medicine out of the cabinet and swallow it. And if you want to grow in God, you have to get his word off the shelf and act on it. *Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works* (James 2:26).

When God brings to your attention a certain commandment or promise in the Bible, act on it. Act in faith that the reason God drew you to it is because he wants to do something. **Very often God waits to do things, even things he wants to do, until someone prays or acts on God's word** (Ezekiel 22:30).

In the Bible, God has given us the operator's manual for human life. When your people need something, teach them to search the Bible for promises and principles that apply to that situation. Teach them to find the conditions, the "if" clauses that accompany almost all of God's promises.^[iii] Then show

them, by example, how to fulfill the conditions and claim the promises, and to persevere until the answer comes.

3. When necessary, apply 2 Timothy 4:2

Paul told Timothy, *Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching (2 Timothy 4:2).*

Teach your people. Create opportunities for them to practice what you taught them. If they don't get it right, gently correct them and encourage them to try again. **You're not just teaching concepts, you're training lives.**

Some people don't like to be corrected. If they start to develop an unteachable attitude, Paul says it's your responsibility to rebuke them. Pastors need to be willing to do it, and people need to be willing to accept it. Otherwise, they'll never grow up to be like their Father.

We're not going to become like Jesus all at once. It's a process. Some of us have been working on it for fifty years or more. But just because it might be slow doesn't mean it's hopeless.

Start with yourself. Ask God to show you one thing in your life that you could change this week to help you become more like Jesus. It might be something about how you live and relate to people: Spirit-filled character. It might relate to how you seek God in your decision-making: Spirit-led wisdom. It might be about trusting God to step out in something that seems impossible: Spirit-powered actions. Or it might have to do with how you pass all this on to somebody else: Spirit-impassioned reproduction. Make sure you yourself are practicing what you teach your people. You're the leader; you have to stay ahead of them.

Points to Remember

- God wants all his children to be like their big brother, Jesus.
- Jesus did what he did through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he gave the Spirit to us so we can do the same.

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- The church is nanny and tutor for God's children.
- Train your people to be like Jesus in Spirit-filled character, Spirit-led wisdom, Spirit-powered actions, and Spirit-impassioned reproduction.
- Becoming like Jesus requires presenting our bodies and renewing our minds.
- As pastor, be willing to correct and discipline when necessary.

[i] Some branches of the church believe that there is a second blessing of the Holy Spirit, often called being baptized in or by the Holy Spirit; others believe the Holy Spirit comes only once, at salvation. That discussion is for a different place. For now, let's just leave it that every Christian has the Holy Spirit in at least some way.

[ii] Some churches teach that miracles, healings and other signs and wonders ended when the last of the twelve original apostles died, or when the New Testament was completed. I believe proper principles of Bible interpretation show otherwise. Besides, I've experienced many of these things myself! But if you feel differently, let's agree to disagree. Just follow 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and use the parts of this book you can agree with.

[iii] For instance, 2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 37:4; Matthew 6:33; Philippians 4:6-7. Sometimes the conditions are marked with the word "if;" sometimes they are more subtle.