



STRONGCHURCH

building and measuring mature disciples

JOHN GREENING

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Strong Church: Building and Measuring Mature Disciples
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Preface

“Spiritual maturity” is an often heard expression in the Christian realm. Unquestionably the term represents a quality that many say is the goal of discipleship. But what is spiritual maturity? How is it achieved? And can it be measured?

It is one thing to talk about spiritual maturity in the abstract. It is quite another to develop a Biblically consistent, functioning plan for spiritual maturity to implement in the church.

Second Timothy 3:16 and 17 set the standard of communicating “all Scripture” within the local church. According to these verses, an all-encompassing course of Bible study must be in place to promote the development of spiritual maturity in the believers who compose the church. It stands to reason that the greater the level of spiritual maturity of its members, the stronger the church. A strong church equals spiritually mature members!

Playing on a quote often ascribed to Dwight L. Moody, “The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him,” consider this adaptation based on 2 Timothy 3:17: “The world has yet to see what God might achieve through a church that skillfully uses His Word to build complete disciples, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” If you would like to be part of that type of church, read on and consider how your church can develop an intentional plan to move believers toward spiritual maturity.

To consistently foster spiritual maturity, ministry leaders need to have a working knowledge of the dynamics of education so they can develop well-defined Biblical learning objectives. They must adopt an instructional taxonomy to ensure that the entire Bible is purposefully taught. Also, they must conduct periodic assessment to measure the church’s progress toward spiritual maturity.

As you think about spiritual maturity in the church, you may be wondering, Is the church’s spiritual maturity measurable? The answer is yes! It is possible to gauge a believer’s spiritual growth. Yet that affirmative comes from a humble recognition of our human limitations and the realization that only God can give a true and comprehensive assessment of a believer’s spiritual state.

Publications exploring the topic of spiritual maturity often omit an assessment component. *Strong Church*, on the other hand, contains the

Scriptural basis of assessing spiritual maturity, evaluation tools for measuring spiritual development, helps for interpreting assessments, and step-by-step guidance in creating action plans to address specific spiritual maturity needs in your church.

As I present these concepts regarding spiritual maturity, two expressions of gratitude are in order. With utmost respect, I acknowledge my wife, Daria's, partnership in the developing and refining of the concepts captured in this book. I discovered that marrying a schoolteacher has advantages that exceed the extra salary and benefits package. Daria opened my eyes to an awareness that was largely absent in my ministry as a pastor. Observing her deliberate approach to the learning process in the classroom caused me to think of the church as an educational environment in which learners develop toward specific, measurable goals. As I served in the pastorate, I realized I was accountable to the Lord for how well I managed my church's educational environment, as evidenced by believers knowing and living out God's Word. What I gained from my wife's discipline and attention to detail greatly enhanced the quality of my pastoral career. Thank you, Daria. You are a complement that God has used to improve my life and service.

Also, I am grateful for an out-of-print book that I read many years ago that prompted an "aha!" moment for me. *Jesus the Teacher*¹ by J. M. Price is an insightful compilation of educational principles meant to guide Sunday School teachers. It is remarkably sophisticated in its seed thoughts of church education. The book stirred within me a hunger to think more deeply about the instructional philosophy and methods modeled by the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ. The concepts I frame in the following chapters I owe in part to J. M. Price. I anticipate meeting him in the future and joining him in expressing gratitude to our heavenly Teacher, Jesus Christ.

This adage is true: "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time." Without a thoughtful plan in place, a church will have a random approach to developing spiritual maturity and not realize its potential in building believers toward maturity in Christ. My prayer is that this book will be a valuable resource as you assess spiritual maturity in your church and make plans to effectively build believers into a Strong Church.

Introduction

What makes a strong church? Is it the depth and diversity of programs offered? Do excellent facilities play a role? How about the presence of capable leaders who can both cast vision and administrate effectively? Maybe people view a church as strong if its budget ends the fiscal year in the black, or if it has increasing attendance figures, a gifted worship team, or a highly sought-after pastor who writes and has a nationally syndicated radio or television program.

While these things might indicate a strong church, two important questions rise to the surface: How does the Bible describe a strong church? and Is it possible for my church to become a strong church? If you want to know the answer to those questions, *Strong Church* is for you.

A strong church knows where it is going. Think of the church's need to be purposeful by considering the following illustration from a school setting.

As children start a new school year, their parents expect them to learn in every subject. School administrators and principals also share those learning expectations. They hold teachers accountable to ensure that students experience solid academic gains. So the teacher begins lesson planning by consulting a list of desirable learning outcomes. The teacher knows that attaining these outcomes is the goal toward which classroom instruction will point.

Then, to attain those outcomes, the teacher develops clearly defined objectives, which will give direction to the instruction. Objectives provide the criteria for assessing both teacher and learner performance. If students are not meeting the criteria, the teacher ponders, Am I presenting the material in the best way? Should I reteach this concept? Do some students need one-on-one attention? Does a student have a learning disability that needs attention? When a teacher develops appropriate instructional objectives and uses them to shape teaching methods and guide assessment, significant learning will most likely occur.

Learning objectives are highly important in establishing an educational environment in the church as well. The pastor of a local church has many responsibilities. Primary among those responsibilities is to teach the Word of God.

The apostle Paul emphasized the importance of pastoral teaching in his counsel to young Pastor Timothy. He wrote of the eventual trend

“that in latter times some will depart from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1). It is for this reason that Paul urged Timothy, “If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of good doctrine which you have carefully followed. . . . These things command and teach. . . . Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. . . . Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:6, 11, 13, 16). When Paul spoke in Miletus to the elders from the church in Ephesus, he used himself as an example to challenge them in their faithfulness as overseers: “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:27, 28). Without intentional instructional objectives for teaching the Word of God and assessment to determine if the objectives are being met, the pastor and his flock flounder. Furthermore, when church members are void of comprehensive understanding, they become susceptible to false teaching.

In the learning environment of the church, God’s Word—in its entirety—is the central instructional component that drives all teaching. This reality demands that certain basic questions be answered about a local church ministry: Does a set of clearly identifiable learning objectives exist for the church members related to the teaching of the Word? What are the intended learning outcomes for church members? Are those outcomes being achieved? Without a clearly defined and coordinated educational strategy, a church’s instructional efforts lose a sense of direction, resulting in substandard performance by teachers and learners.

Strong Church outlines learning aims for the local church, based upon the teaching model of Christ. By observing Christ’s model of teaching, we can learn what our instructional aims should be and how to achieve those aims through planned and purposeful instruction.

Strong Church helps you take a thoughtful look at the learning model operating in your church. All those engaged in the instructional process will benefit by studying this book: pastors, deacons, Sunday Bible School superintendents and teachers, small group leaders, children’s workers, student ministry leaders, and individual disciplers. Also, the concepts in this book will be helpful to parents as they guide their children’s spiritual development.

Strong Church Overview

To gain a big-picture awareness of *Strong Church*, note the following overview provided by chapter summaries.

Chapter 1 introduces the Biblical metaphor of the church as a building project. You will begin to see God's purposeful design and approach to building up believers in their faith.

Chapter 2 lays out the common instructional goal of spiritual maturity toward which all church instruction should be moving. Through considering a series of questions and completing an informal assessment, you will come to understand the extent of your church's intentional effort in building toward a shared goal.

Chapter 3 offers a blueprint for spiritual maturity and underscores the importance of having specific educational aims and objectives. Understanding and utilizing these concepts will enable you to teach the Word of God with greater purpose and focus.

Chapter 4 assists you in building your skills as an instructor. Skilled teachers are essential for implementing a spiritual maturity blueprint. By observing the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ; identifying the progression of student understanding; and learning how to write effective learning objectives, you will become more effective in building disciples.

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of assessing spiritual maturity based upon a basic theology of assessment. To assist you in measuring the progress your church is making in building up believers toward spiritual maturity, the chapter includes useful assessment tools and instructions for administering them.

Chapter 6 shows you how to interpret assessment data to better understand your learners. You will discover how to convert assessment data into workable strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning that take place in your church. Case studies will demonstrate how to use assessments to chart future direction for church discipleship efforts.

Chapter 7 walks you through the process of developing action plans, which are the means of implementing the educational strategy based on assessment data. Without making specific plans and coordinating details, your church will make little progress in strengthening its discipleship process.

Chapter 8 brings all of the concepts together in a way that will enable you to mobilize your church for progressing toward spiritual maturity.

As with any building project, when all the crew members are working together from the same set of plans and coordinating their efforts,

the potential for achieving the desired result greatly increases. You can improve the effectiveness of your church's discipleship efforts if your church's educational team understands the ultimate goal of the church's educational plan and how their work contributes to achieving that goal. Through leadership's careful planning and assessment and the Holy Spirit's enlightenment, the instruction of God's Word will yield a Strong Church!



1

Building Christ's Church

When Christ announced the future formation of His church in Matthew 16:18, He chose to present the news using construction imagery: “I will build My church.” The New Testament often associates the metaphor of “building” with the church (Acts 20:32; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:4–7). Thinking of the church as a building project provides a way of seeing, planning, and executing the work that God intends to take place in the life of a church. In 1 Corinthians 3, the apostle Paul uses the language of construction to describe skillful teaching in the Corinthian church. Paul refers to himself as a wise master builder who teaches the Word of God to the believers comprising that church, which he collectively calls “God’s building.” As he addresses his “fellow workers,” who contributed to the construction of the church as they taught the Word, he challenges them to give careful attention to the manner in which they build. Other metaphors for the church, such as “body,” “temple,” “marriage,” “family,” and “nation,” add important layers of understanding. However, no metaphor has as far-reaching implications when referring to the formation of Christ’s church as that of a building project.

Christ’s announcement in Matthew 16:18 suggests several underlying truths that comprise the basis of the church construction project. These seven truths form the framework for the development of spiritual maturity—an intentional process by which individuals come to faith in Jesus Christ and grow toward God’s desired goal of transformation.

TRUTH 1 Christ Is the Church’s Architect

Every building project requires an architect who envisions what the building is to look like, how it is to be built, and how it is to function. The architect designs the plan, determines the construction materials, and

oversees the construction to ensure its accordance with the design. The architect is the final authority on the project.

Christ is the competent architect of the church. When Christ announced in Matthew 16:18, “On this rock I will build My church,” He envisioned what the church is to be and to do. Ironically, the Roman Catholic misinterpretation of “this rock” has resulted in an alternative architectural schema based in part on papal authority. In his first epistle, the apostle Peter, claimed by the Roman Catholic Church as the first pope, clearly identifies the only authority of the church. Quoting three Old Testament passages (Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22; Isa. 8:14), Peter identifies Jesus Christ, Whom the Jewish religious leaders rejected as the Messiah, as the sole Cornerstone—foundational to the construction of the church. “Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.’ Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,’ and ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense’” (1 Pet. 2:6–8). The link with Matthew 16:18 is unmistakable; Christ, not Peter, is the Rock upon which the church is built. Christ is the church’s sole architect.

The Architect’s role

Ephesians 4:8–16 provides a pithy summary of Christ’s plan for church construction, clearly revealing His role as the church’s architect. The summary begins in verse 8 with a quote from Psalm 68:18, projecting the authority of a sovereign who, celebrating victory over an enemy, is distributing the spoils of his victory. “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8). Christ’s death and resurrection have conquered the enemies Satan and death, thus demonstrating Christ’s authority. It is as though He, as a conquering sovereign, gives the spoils of His victory in the form of spiritual gifts. Later, the passage reveals that the gifts would be used to build His church. “Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9, 10). Because of His incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension, Christ has a position of supreme authority from which He builds His church.

Ephesians 4:11 and 12 detail the process of constructing the church: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for

the work of ministry, for the edifying [building up] of the body of Christ.” In other words, divinely gifted and assigned instructors equip the saints (believers in Jesus Christ) for functional roles within the church.

The ultimate goal toward which the divine Architect designates the church to be built is found in Ephesians 4:13: “Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” As a corporate body, the church is to be built toward the mature likeness of Christ.

The Architect warns of dangers to construction of the church. Believers’ immaturity, coupled with erroneous teaching in the church, can impede pursuit of Christlike maturity; therefore, “we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Eph. 4:14). Rather, the church is to grow up into mature likeness to its head, Jesus Christ, as God’s truth is taught in a loving manner. “But, speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

As the church implements the Architect’s design, it will reach a tipping point. The learned and maturing members of the church who are equipped for ministry will initiate further growth of fellow believers. The church begins to build by adhering to the Architect’s plan. “From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying [building up] of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16).

Christ the Architect’s approach to church construction sets the standard. Many models of church ministry exist; only the models that align with God’s plan revealed in His Word are acceptable in His sight.

TRUTH 2 The Church’s Design Is Durable

Solid engineering and construction

A building that has faulty engineering will eventually succumb to the forces of nature. In Matthew 7:24–27, Jesus emphasizes the importance of following His sayings. He illustrates by contrasting solid construction techniques with faulty ones:

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain

descended, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

In contrast, a quality design that has been built properly produces a structure that will endure. Christ said, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Over the centuries, Christ’s design for the church has enabled it to withstand the threatening forces of enemies and the evil one, Satan, and his schemes. The apostle Paul knew the dangers. Emphasizing the need to follow his example of faithfully teaching God’s Word because enemies of truth will seek to undermine the teaching, Paul expressed his concern and cautioned the elders of the church of Ephesus:

For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. (Acts 20:27–31)

The Architect’s design

It is imperative that churches follow the divine design carefully. Throughout church history, many individuals have ignored the Architect’s design, building the church instead with their own designs. Inevitably this practice leads to faulty construction. In building the local church, a pastor must lead by following exclusively the design of the divine Architect.

So in 1 Corinthians 3:9–15, Paul emphasized the importance of building the church according to the Architect’s design:

For we are God’s fellow workers; . . . you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds

on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

A church that does not follow the divine design will inevitably fail, but the quality construction of a church built by God's design will endure eternally and be rewarded.

The construction crew

The church does not prevail against Hades (Matt. 16:18) when believers are passive, but as they resist the evil one. Peter challenged the saints, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:8, 9). Likewise, Paul instructed the Corinthian church, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3–5). Paul instructed the Ephesian church, too, about the ensuing battle against the forces of evil.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Eph. 6:10–13)

TRUTH 3

The Church Is Built of Unusual Construction Material

In the Old Testament God initiated construction projects in the form of the tabernacle and the temple. Adhering to His specific orders, builders used common construction materials of the day, such as wood, metal, stone, skins, and cloth. When Christ announced His church, how-

ever, He communicated that the church is to be built using very different material—regenerate people: “You also, as living stones, are being built up” (1 Pet. 2:5).

Local churches often meet in a physical structure. However, the facility is not the church Christ had in mind when He said, “I will build My church.” He was speaking instead of a construction project by which people are saved and built up in their faith.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19–22)

The focus of church ministry is to be less about facility and program development and more about believers’ spiritual development. Well-designed facilities and functioning programs are useful, but only as a means to the end of spiritual growth. The vital work of church construction actually takes place in believers’ lives.

TRUTH 4 The Church Is Built Using a Primary Tool

Conventional building construction requires the use of common tools such as picks, shovels, chisels, trowels, saws, and hammers. Christ’s church is to be built using a different tool—the Word of God: “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32), and “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

Churches that design their ministries around tools that marginalize or trivialize the Word will not be built as Christ intended. The skillful use of the Word is essential to spiritual development. Any strategy a pastor designs must have the Word as its infrastructure. Paul communicated with Timothy regarding the centrality of the Word in church ministry, “I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). According to God’s design, the Word is the essential tool for constructing the church properly.

TRUTH 5**The Church Is Built Using a Skilled Crew of Pastors and Teachers**

Rarely does one person alone construct a physical building of any magnitude. Instead, the project requires the coordinated effort of a crew of laborers who work together to achieve the goal. When God conveyed to Moses His blueprint for the construction of the tabernacle, the plan called for a skilled crew of workers to complete the job. God equipped individuals such as Bezalel and Aholiab not only to do the work of design and construction, but also to teach others the necessary technical skills (Exod. 35:30–36:1). In this way He created a large, competent workforce. The workers' combined and coordinated efforts resulted in the completion of the tabernacle.

While ultimately the church's construction is Christ's project, He uses qualified pastors and teachers of the Word to carry out the church's construction (Eph. 4:11–13). Paul testified to the Corinthians that according to the grace of God that was given to him, as a wise master builder, he laid the foundation, and others were building on it. He warned, “But let each one take heed how he builds on it” (1 Cor. 3:10). The apostle Paul also challenged Pastor Timothy to develop others who would faithfully teach the Word, rather than doing the work of spiritual construction alone: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). This challenge remains a vital imperative for every teacher or preacher of the Word. An effective church-based strategy of spiritual development must include a plan for training teachers.

TRUTH 6**The Church Construction Is Inspected by Christ**

Periodic inspection of construction projects is necessary to ensure they are completed properly. Construction of the church is no different. In the remarkable passage of Revelation 2 and 3, the divine Architect of the church gave a detailed assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the seven local churches. To the church in Ephesus, He said, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev. 2:2–4).

Christ's intent in issuing assessment reports to those churches was to encourage them in the good work they were doing and to admonish them to correct problems. The task of building the church today must be taken seriously. Christ expects His church to be built as He intended. He will assess the work to see if it meets His construction specifications. Every builder on the church construction project will be judged for the work performed (1 Cor. 3:9–17). Assessment on construction of the church will be part of The Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:9–11).

TRUTH 7 A Construction Helper Is Present

As Paul explained in his profile of the office of pastor in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, a novice is not to undertake this church construction project. The church needs godly, skilled craftsmen. James gives a sobering warning regarding the skill level needed for building the church by teaching the Word, saying, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). The task of church construction is intimidating. For this reason, in John 14:16, 17; 15:26, 27; 16:5–11; and 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, Jesus promises divine assistance. His promise to the men who served on the first construction crew of the church is a great source of encouragement to all who undertake the work: “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16, 17). A divine Partner helps in building the church—the Holy Spirit.

These seven truths provide foundational concepts that pastors and church leaders can think about concerning their God-assigned construction project in their own churches. Consider the following summarizing statements, using them to evaluate your church's level of commitment to Christ-designed church construction:

- We view Christ as the sole architect of our church's faith and practice.
- We are alert to the dangers of alternative models of faith and practice.
- We are focusing our ministry on building the spiritual lives of our people.
- We use the Bible as the primary tool for building our church.

- We have a capable team of pastor(s) and teachers who effectively teach the Word of God.
- We recognize that Christ will inspect our work of building the church.
- We rely on the Holy Spirit's enabling in doing the work of building the church.

The next step in the construction process is to use the seven foundational concepts to develop an actual strategy or blueprint for spiritual construction that will give intentional direction to all that is done in the church.

Question to ponder:

What is the goal toward which your local church of believers is being built?