



Two weeks ago on his eighteenth birthday, this man, Junrey Balawing, was officially declared to be the world's smallest man. He stands at a shocking height of 23.5 inches. He stopped growing when he was two years old and doctors have not been able to diagnose his medical condition. It is a gross understatement to say that something is very wrong with this young man. He is not healthy and will probably not live a long life. The universal principle that we are all familiar with is that healthy things grow. When the tomatoes in our garden acquire blight every year despite the fact that we buy disease resistant plants and follow all of the tips and hints, we know that our tomatoes are not healthy.

Healthy things will grow. This is true of tomatoes, our bodies and our spiritual lives. A healthy Christian will grow in his or her spiritual life and if they do not have positive growth curve over time, we know that their spiritual health is in question. Our spiritual lives are literally alive. You may not be able to detect a heartbeat like we can with our bodies, but they are no less alive.

Therefore, if individual believers are alive, then collectively this means that the church is also a living entity. Jesus taught this in many of his parables. One of my favorites is from Mark 4. *"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head (Mark 4:26-28).*

I love the part about the farmer not knowing how the seed grows. Whatever you do, please do not see this as the ignorance of a first century farmer. Of course a farmer in Jesus' day knew that seeds need water, air, sunlight and soil in order to grow. They did not understand chlorophyll and photosynthesis; they did not have the entire gene sequence of each plant available to them, but they knew how to grow a crop. So when Jesus says that the farmer did not know how the seed sprouted and grew, he doesn't mean that the farmers were ignorant of modern science and

technology but rather he meant that God has built his creation with powerful organic building blocks. Even today we really don't know how a seed grows into a plant or how a human zygote becomes a full-term infant. We can break the steps down and describe them in amazing detail, but we really don't know how it 'works'. No one knows how a stem cell differentiates into many different and specific cells.

This is one of the many benefits of a Christian worldview. We don't have to understand all of the intricacies to know that God did it. I don't care how long Jesus tarries before his return, we will never uncover the deepest secrets of his creation. God has built this universe with a near infinite complexity which is itself a reflection of his infinite intelligence. Therefore, we really don't know how a seed sprouts and grows—we just know that God did it. And since this parable is describing the kingdom of God, the same can be said of individual Christians, local churches and the broader kingdom on this earth—we don't really know how God grows our spiritual lives, but we do know that God did it.

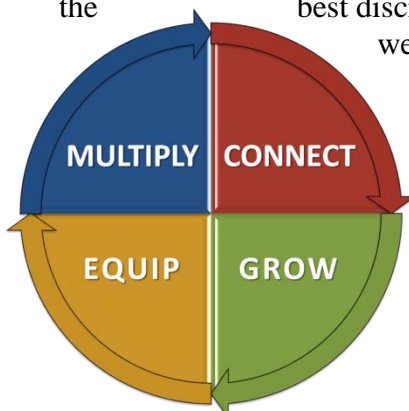
This is what I mean by organic church. It's not organic in the sense of free of pesticides and antibiotics, but organic in the sense that God has built the kingdom and the church and the believer to be living, spiritual entities. But just like farming, even though we don't know everything there is to know, we do know enough, because God told us enough. This message begins a several week series on discipleship I am calling, Organic Church.

In order for healthy spiritual growth to happen in the kingdom, in the church and in the life of the believer, we must have all of the following.

1. Discipleship Ingredients—the Bible and the Holy Spirit
2. Discipleship Environment—the church and the family
3. Discipleship Process—to us and from us  
Connect—Grow—Equip—Multiply
4. Discipleship Structure/Ministries—The Trellis that supports the Vine

First, there are two ingredients—the Bible and the Holy Spirit. These two are like air, water and sunshine for the plant—they are indispensable. Nothing can ever grow without both of them. I think it is safe to say that most Christians who are not growing spiritually are deficient in one of these two. If we took a poll of our church, what percentage of people do you think read the Bible on a regular basis?

You can grow in your faith if all you trapped on a deserted island with only a Bible and dependence on the Holy Spirit. However, God has created us to be in community which is why the best discipleship environments are the church and the family. In later weeks we will take a closer look at both environments.



Thirdly you need a discipleship process. I have summarized this process as one that comes to us and then flows from us to others. More specifically, there are four stages in the process.

The fourth stage is the need for discipleship structures. These structures are like a trellis for the living vine of spiritual growth. Ministries provide this structure and we will also see how our various ministries attempt to provide this needed structure. This morning we will focus on point 3—the discipleship process—and our text is 2 Timothy 2:1-7.

*You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. <sup>3</sup> Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. <sup>5</sup> Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. <sup>7</sup> Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*

Verse two lays out the process of discipleship. It is both profoundly simple and revolutionary. The process began with the apostle Paul. Timothy was one of his disciples, so naturally Paul passed on his body of teaching to his protégé. Timothy heard this teaching in the context of “many witnesses” which implies that it was in a group setting. Paul was attempting to teach and equip many people at the same time. Timothy may have been the star student in the bunch, but he was not alone. In turn, Timothy was to pass on this body of teaching to reliable men.

There are several implications here. The first is that the message should be entrusted to reliable men. The gospel and its corresponding truth is a sacred trust. It must be continually taught and never assumed. Here is a helpful quote from Dr. Don Carson on what can happen when we assume the gospel.

In a fair bit of Western evangelicalism, there is a worrying tendency to focus on the periphery. [My] colleague ... Dr. Paul Hiebert ... springs from Mennonite stock and analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless. One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the “entailments” became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.<sup>1</sup>

Let me make an application of what Dr. Carson is saying. The first generation of believers preaches and teaches the true gospel and also rightly lays out many applications of the gospel, for example, being pro-life. I am convinced that a right understanding of the gospel will lead a person to a pro-life, anti-abortion position. However, being pro-life is NOT the gospel, even though it is an important application of the gospel. So what can happen is that the second generation begins to assume the gospel and focus more on the application of the gospel, again in this case, being pro-life. Most of the people in that second generation understand the gospel and think that everyone around them understands the gospel and therefore they don’t teach and preach about it as often as they once did. This generation assumes the gospel and they are content to apply the gospel using a pro-life position. But when the third generation comes along,

since most of the emphasis in the prior generation was on the application of the gospel and not the gospel itself, the third generation falsely assumes that what was once an application of the gospel is now the gospel itself. They have forgotten the gospel and all that remains is the application, the good deeds.

This is exactly what happened to the liberal denominations within Christianity. Every one of them at one time faithfully and actively preached the gospel. It may be hard to imagine this, but it is true. They rightly realized that this gospel needed to be applied and one way they applied it was to take care of the poor. From there on they followed this path described by Dr. Carson. The next generation assumed the gospel but applied it and the third generation forgot the gospel but still applied it. This is why liberal denominations and liberal churches are so active in serving the poor. If you asked them why they serve the poor they could probably come up with a Bible verse or two but their good deeds are not flowing from the gospel. Their reason for existence is not the spreading of the gospel and its many applications but merely good deeds. Paul insisted that the gospel message be entrusted to “reliable men” so that the gospel would never be assumed but always entrusted to the next generation.

Second, this is where the process begins to multiply. No one knows how many “reliable men” would have been in Ephesus, where Timothy served as pastor, but there were at least several.

This was so important to Paul for several reasons. He wanted Timothy to make sure he passed on the gospel message before Timothy left Ephesus to come visit Paul in prison at Rome. Timothy was the lead elder/pastor in the city of Ephesus carrying out the vital role of teaching and growing the young church in Ephesus. But Paul needed Timothy to come to him in Rome. He needed his cloak, no doubt because he was cold, and his scrolls. Furthermore, he needed companionship and encouragement (Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (see 2 Tim. 4:9-13). The teaching must be passed on before Timothy was to leave. Paul wanted to make certain that Timothy had a process of discipleship in place before he left Ephesus. Timothy was a man in transition.

Speaking of transitions, here is what Pastor John Piper said to his congregation on Sunday, June 12<sup>th</sup> after pastoring this church for the past 31 years.

My proposal to the elders—and it comes from Noël and me, not just me (we have talked a lot about this, as you can imagine)—is that I transition from pastor for preaching and vision to a fulltime writing and Bethlehem College and Seminary teaching and mentoring and wider speaking role on June 30, 2014—three years from now. And that we be very intentional and prayerful and thoughtful about a successor in those years.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Piper has built an effective church structure and discipleship process at his Minneapolis church and unlike other pastors who just decide to up and leave one day, he wants to make sure that there is a process of succession to make sure that the ministry will continue in a healthy direction when he is ready to move out of the lead teaching role. Stuart Briscoe at Elmbrook did the same thing with his church.

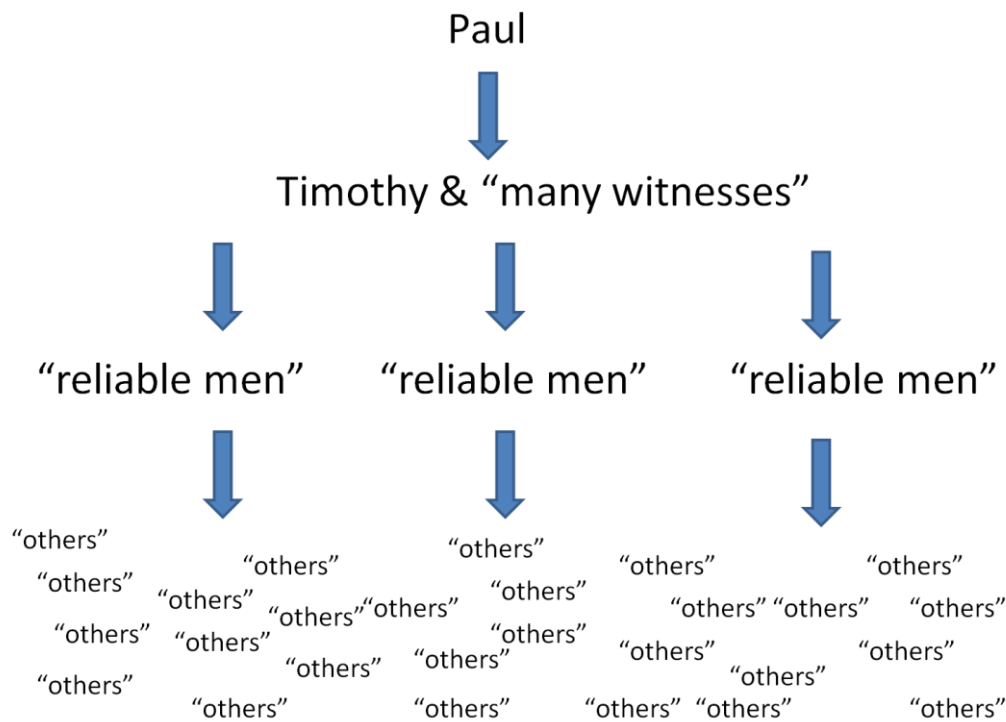
The sacred trust of the gospel must be entrusted to “reliable men who are qualified to teach others.” Teaching is a primary role of an elder so Paul surely had elders in mind for these men.

However, the informal teaching process need not be limited to the elders. The designation of “reliable men” assumes men of character but not necessarily position. He wasn’t merely looking for someone to pass on the reins of power. He wasn’t in need of someone to fill a “ministry slot.” Timothy needed to find reliable men who would be able to learn from him, who had sound character and who were growing in grace. Timothy needed men that could be equipped for even greater and larger ministry.

The next phases of the process move from the reliable men to “others.” This is where the process finally begins to multiply. Don’t forget that the gospel started in Ephesus with one man—Paul. The church grew to where it was through this same process. If we looked at this in a linear manner, it could look like this.



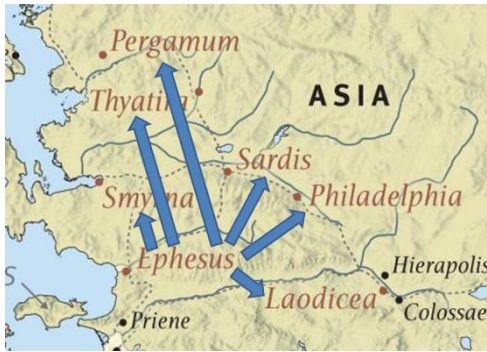
But this does not do justice to what actually happened. The whole process was one of multiplication and looked more like this.



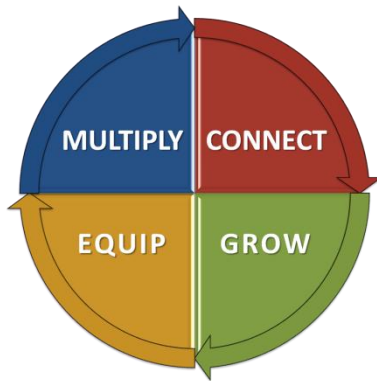
This was the goal but did it work out in real life? Was Timothy able to multiply the ministry? Did the reliable men do their job? Did they pass on the gospel and all teaching to others? Did the discipleship process continue or not? How do we know? Let me fill in some pieces of history for you.

Paul founded the church in Ephesus in AD 52-55. Paul left Timothy in charge at Ephesus for the better part of the next ten years. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy in AD 65 and he was executed

a year later. But there is more to the story than this. The one church in Ephesus multiplied their ministry and became the seven churches of Revelation. It is widely accepted that these seven churches were planted by the church in Ephesus. Instead of Paul carrying the message to these seven cities, a church that Paul had started and handed over to Timothy, taught and trained people to the level that they could in turn start new churches. Timothy did pass on the teaching to reliable men who in turn taught others and spread the message over all of Asia.



But where did he get these reliable men? From a bigger process of discipleship. The passing on of faithful teaching is part of the equipping and multiplying stages but the other two stages are also necessary. In other words, Timothy did not take grab a pagan or Jewish person in Ephesus and tell them to go plant new churches. He didn't even ask new converts to do this. There was a much larger process that is implied in verse two and as a church, we define this process in four stages.



**Connect**—Becoming connected to Jesus Christ, to a local church and to fellow believers.

**Grow**—Growing in your knowledge of God and his Word resulting in continual personal transformation.

**Equip**—Preparing to serve God in a wide range of areas and helping others to connect and grow.

**Multiply**—Training and releasing maturing, servant leaders so that all ministry is multiplied.

The connect phase is a process of becoming connected to Jesus Christ, to a local church and to fellow believers. All three of these connections are vital. Obviously, becoming connected to Jesus Christ is accomplished through some sort of evangelism. This is why discipleship is always paired with evangelism. Some pastors have titles such as “Pastor of Evangelism and Discipleship.” New believers need to be connected to a local church because the local church is the God ordained vehicle for reaching the world with the gospel.

The next step is the growth phase. When does this phase begin? It begins at the moment of conversion. And when does this phase end? It ends at death. Growth in Christ likeness is a lifelong process.

We have already talked about the stages of equip and multiply. Please do not think of these parts of the discipleship process as stages that you move past. This is not like first grade, second grade, third grade and fourth grade. You never “graduate” from any of these stages. Now if you are a young Christian, you may have not been equipped for ministry or had the opportunity to help others along in the process, but once you have spent time, so to speak, in all of these phases, the goal is to continually move among all four stages.

This past week we saw how this process works in the lives of friends that we visited in Chicago. We held a Bible study with this couple back in 1993-1994. At that point in time, they were not yet married, the husband was a brand new Christian and his fiancé was not yet a believer. We met together for a weekly Bible study for over a year until I took my first pastorate in Prairie du Sac, WI. We were privileged to help lead the wife to the Lord and more or less jump start their Christian faith. Over the years they have led many Bible studies of their own and have grown in the Lord a great deal. This past Thursday night when we visited, Sean was eager to study the topic of the rapture and tribulation. I had not really studied this topic in depth since my seminary days so not only was it a joy to dig into the Word with him, but he challenged me with several of his thoughts on key passages. He has developed a great way of thinking deeply and critically about the Scriptures. And it all started with a basic Bible study. At the time we were not thinking that we were going to lead them through the four phases of the discipleship process, but that is indeed what happened, not because we had a great strategic plan but because with the help of the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual growth is an organic, living entity that grows all by itself.

Where are you at in these phases? By the fact of being a Christian, your spiritual life is alive, but how would you describe it? Fruitful and flourishing? Are your roots shallow and your spiritual growth curve flat? Are you the spiritual equivalent of the smallest man in the world? The Lord intends that we use these principles to enter into a life of continual spiritual transformation, to his glory.

Rich Maurer  
June 26, 2011

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson. *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philipians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing, 1996. Pgs. 22-28.

<sup>2</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/06/15/succession-plans-and-growing-older/>