

Making Strong Disciples

Introduction. Worker ants sacrifice time and efficiency to teach other ants how to find food, which benefits their society as a whole.

There's more. According to research published several years ago, when a female ant goes out to find food, she'll often choose another ant to accompany her. If the second ant doesn't know the way to the food source, the leader will teach her through a process called "tandem running." As the teacher runs along the path to food, the student follows behind, often stopping to locate landmarks. That creates a gap between the leader and student. When ready, the student will run forward and tap the teacher on the back legs.

Ants participating in tandem running located a food source in an average of 35 percent faster. However, the process is detrimental to the teachers. Research indicated that the lead ants traveled up to four times faster when not accompanied by a student.

So why do leaders sacrifice their time and efficiency to teach others? According to Nigel Franks, study leader, "They are very closely related nest mates, and their society as a whole will benefit." This occurs as the students gradually learn their way and are able to teach other ants, which increases the efficiency of the population.

Although God wants us to make new disciples (Matthew 28:19-20), He also wants us to strengthen His disciples, and that process is expounded and exemplified in Acts 14. Much like a colony of ants, we do that through sacrifice and service. In Acts 14:19-23, Paul was beaten and left for dead. But he arose to preach the life-giving gospel. He then went back into the mouth of the lion, strengthening these new disciples. The five ways that they were made strong back in the first century is the perfect model of how you can be strong too.

I. Disciples Were Made Strong Through God's Word

- A. They needed to "continue in the faith". This enables all of us to be firmly established and steadfast (Colossians 1:23).
- B. The words of conversion, transformation, and strength keep us anchored to the hope of the gospel (Romans 1:16-17; 12:1-2, 6-8).

II. Disciples Were Made Strong Through Good Examples

- A. Paul and Barnabas said, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom". The exhortation of "many tribulations" is echoed in his own account of persecutions (2 Corinthians 11:22-29; cp. Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 3:10-12).
- B. In Acts new believers are exhorted to persevere in the faith (Acts 11:23; 13:43), and the reference to "tribulations" indicates that the Christian's life is often beset by difficulties. They would need faithful commitment like with Abraham (Genesis 22:17-18), Moses (Numbers 12:7), and Josiah (2 Kings 23:25).

III. Disciples Were Made Strong Through Godly Leadership

- A. Elders are shepherds and men who serve in this capacity learn from Jesus. He would do anything for the flock (Matthew 9:35-38), and elders have to work (Acts 20:26-32). But there is a wear and tear to leadership. There's lots of

bumps and bruises, and decision fatigue is real. Leadership is hard all of the time, but this is when leaders lead.

- B. All congregations should work toward giving men the opportunity to grow. Men should also equip themselves by seeing the need, developing the desire to serve, and developing the necessary character and family virtues (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

IV. Disciples Were Made Strong Through True Faith

- A. These brethren prayed with fasting; they manifested true faith. This was actual faithfulness, not just mental assent (Romans 1:5; 16:25-27). Faith is more than a heart issue — it's a lifestyle. However, it won't be a flawless one (1 John 1:8-10).
- B. Faith exists to bring about obedience (James 2:14-26). If there's no action, it's not faith. Working because of your faith is how the gospel changes lives (cp. Romans 4:1-2, 13).

V. Disciples Were Made Strong Through Solid Fellowship

- A. The brethren in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch came to an agreement to send these people out for the purpose of spreading the gospel and advancing the cause of Jesus Christ.
- B. Real fellowship is a relationship, shared activity, and mutual identity. It's a group of people who have shared purpose and joint participation (Acts 2:42; 20:7).
- C. When we develop each other, we are participating in edification. Another term for this is equipping saints (Ephesians 4:11-16).
 - 1. Each of us can make a difference because the local church's work is accomplished by Bible classes, sermons, gospel meetings, worship assemblies, and teaching as well as being taught.
 - 2. It's not accomplished by recreation, social meals, politics, or social justice, but by godly living, spiritual growth, and making more disciples.

Conclusion. Local churches often get a bad rap. Because of this, and somewhat understandably, people don't want to be members. Therefore, you have people who want to be Christians — not church members. But this is impossible.

The death of Jesus gives life to many. When we obey Him, it makes us part of something bigger than ourselves (Ecclesiastes 4:12). We grow the most when we give the most in service.

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