

Philosophy of Discipleship

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The Dilemma

There is much talk today on the subject of discipleship. Many churches have someone on their staff whose job title is “Discipleship.” Yet, there is very little consensus on exactly what that means, let alone, how it should express itself. Those committed to discipleship (however they define it) have a tendency to look down their noses at those who don’t see its place and importance (as they define it). Those who don’t come from a discipleship perspective tend to tolerate those who do, and view their activities as an acceptable “add-on” to the ministry of the church. They do not, however, place discipleship as the essential priority of the church. They view it as merely one of many elective activities in the program. Before the two groups can reach a common ground, there must be a unified perspective on the definition and role of discipleship in the church. If we can agree that the Bible is the authoritative voice for defining discipleship and for identifying discipleship’s role in the life of the local church, then a consensus should be within reach.

A Biblical Definition of Discipleship

The term “discipleship” does not appear in Scripture. It is the creation of man in an attempt to identify the process of disciple-making. “Disciple,” however, is a thoroughly Biblical term occurring over 270 times in the English translation of the Scriptures (NASB). The difference is significant. The easiest mistake to make in defining discipleship would be to do so solely by the process instead of by the product. Scripture does, I believe, communicate a sense of process both through its instruction and its models. We must avoid temptation though, to miss the proverbial forest for the trees. In other words, we must be careful not to become so focused on a particular component that we miss the big picture. Painting a Biblical portrait of discipleship begins with answering the question, “What is a disciple?”

What is a Disciple?

The Biblical term “disciple” is translated from the Greek word μαθητης (mathetes) which literally means “a learner, or pupil.” Culturally, it communicated the idea of one linked as a follower of a recognized teacher. The word infers an intellectual process that directly shapes the lifestyle of the person. It is not an exclusively Christian term, and even in the Bible it is used of the “disciples” of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2), of the Pharisees (Mark 2:18), and of Moses (Jn. 9:28).

Discipleship and “disciple” being clarified, “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?” Scripture answers this question in several places. First, in John 15:7-8 we read, “*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.*” These verses hold 5 characteristics of a disciple:

- **He abides in Christ.** A disciple is one who abides in Christ, consistently walking with Him; not perfection, but pursuit.
- **The Words of Christ abide in him.** Colossians 3:16 says, “*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you . . .*” For a disciple, the Word is his authority and the Word is his delight.
- **Prayer and answers characterize his life.** This is built on the foundation of the first two characteristics, and implies a lifestyle of communion and communication with God.
- **He bears fruit.** Fruit is the logical consequence of the other three practices, and is expressed in the fruit of Christian character (Gal.5:22-23, Mt.3:8) and the fruit of Christian ministry (Rom. 1:13, 15:28; Col. 1:10).
- **He glorifies God.** When a disciple abides in Christ and the words of Christ fill his life, when his life is characterized by answered prayer and fruit-bearing, he brings glory to God.

PHILOSOPHY OF DISCIPLESHIP (CONTINUED)

Another place that addresses what it means to be a disciple is Matthew 28:18-20, which states, “*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'*”

The product of disciple-making, according to this passage, is people who have identified themselves with the Lord (baptized) and who *observe all that Christ commanded*. In other words, a disciple is characterized by *identity with and obedience to Christ*. Now that we understand what a disciple is Biblically speaking, we can begin to define the process of making disciples.

Common Mistakes in Discipleship

ERROR #1: EXCLUDING THE LOCAL CHURCH

In modern Christianity, sadly, much of what is called discipleship is taking place outside the ministry of the local church. Yet, the Great Commission clearly identifies that the central task for the whole of the body of Christ is to “*make disciples of all the nations . . .*” Why should the local church be at the center of this task? Jesus commands that we are to be “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*” To “baptize” means to identify with God and implies identification with the people of God. Most discipleship-focused ministries do not baptize because they recognize this to be the responsibility of the local church. Yet clearly, Jesus includes this in the task of disciple-making. Therefore, discipleship that does not integrate local church involvement and identification is incomplete and inadequate. All the teaching and inferences of the New Testament make it clear God desires to work through His agent, the church.

ERROR #2: DISCIPLESHIP EQUALS SMALL GROUPS

One common mistake we tend to make is in how we define discipleship. A common, but flawed definition making the rounds today is that discipleship equals small groups. Let’s examine this. The “discipleship = small groups” people always point to the example of Jesus and say, “See, He had twelve disciples.” The problem with this statement is not in its inaccuracy, but in its incompleteness. While clearly Jesus spent a significant amount of time with the twelve, He also ministered in much broader ways. His ministry included the seventy He involved in training and ministry (Luke 10), the hundred and twenty gathered in the upper room for prayer (Acts 1), and the 5,000+ He fed who were part of His teaching ministry (Luke 9).

Many of these the Bible clearly identifies as disciples of Jesus. If discipleship equals small groups then we are defining in terms of the process (small groups) instead of the product (those who abide in Christ, in His Word, in prayer, in fruit-bearing and in obedience). Small groups are a very useful tool in the toolbox of the disciple-maker, but there are other tools as well. A tunnel vision view of discipleship, as only small groups, guarantees that others view it as one of many programs of the church. This will not place disciple-making at the heart of the church where it belongs.

ERROR #3: SMALL GROUPS EQUALS DISCIPLESHIP

Related to the mistake of saying that discipleship equals small groups is the erroneous idea that small groups equal discipleship. Just because a group is small does not mean that it is producing disciples. Disciple-making has a clear product in view: those who abide in Christ, in His Word, in prayer, in fruit-bearing and in obedience. If what happens in the small group is not intentionally moving people in the direction of being a disciple as Scripture defines it, then discipleship is not happening regardless of what we call it. Again, we see that the product, not just the process, defines discipleship.

PHILOSOPHY OF DISCIPLESHIP (CONTINUED)

One of the unfortunate consequences of the tunnel vision view of those who say that discipleship equals small groups or that small groups equal discipleship is the tendency to devalue the ministries of the church other than small groups. Yet clearly, there are many things that the local church can and should do which work toward the product of making disciples. Effective preaching and teaching are important components to help people grow as obedient disciples of Jesus. Personal involvement in ministry is another component that is not limited to small group times. One-to-one counseling can fulfill an important role in discipleship. Fellowship rightly done contributes to spiritual growth. Times of corporate worship fit into the equation of disciple-making. While small groups can and should be an important tool in the toolbox, we err when we limit discipleship to that one ingredient.

ERROR #4: SINGLE-SOURCE MENTORING

Another common mistake we tend to make in defining discipleship is to focus on the role of the individual while neglecting the role of the environment. Again, “discipleship-by-individual” folks tend to point to Jesus to defend their view. They say, “Jesus personally discipled the twelve,” and equate that with their own discipleship. Discipleship by individual is great if your discipler is Jesus, but when it is someone else problems arise. Jesus said in Luke 6:40 that every disciple, after he had been fully trained, would be “*like his teacher.*” If your teacher is Jesus that works fine, but everyone else is imperfect, flawed, and stained by sin. If there is only one dominant spiritual influencer in your life, you will begin to reflect not only his strengths but also his weaknesses. Second, no one individual possesses all the spiritual gifts. It is these principles that make the small group as important as one-on-one times, and the whole environment of the church as important as the small group.

ERROR #5: IGNORING THE ENVIRONMENT

The Greenhouse Strategy

God chooses to relate to His people both corporately and individually. Discipleship that focuses only on the individual is incomplete and inadequate. God intends for the individual to be integrated into the body of Christ, both locally and universally. A family (a plural unit with mother, father, brothers and sisters) is the God-designed unit for shaping an individual from birth to personal maturity. In the same way, the body of Christ is the God-designed unit for shaping an individual from spiritual birth to spiritual maturity. What Jesus was as an individual in terms of ministry, the church is as an entity. This is why disciple-making should be at the heart of all that a church is and all that it does. Everything ought to focus on the product of the disciple. In essence the church ought to function as a “spiritual greenhouse.” In a greenhouse, everything is focused on creating the optimum environment for growth, and the individual plant is central in the design of everything.

A greenhouse is designed to provide optimum sunlight, optimum temperature, optimum humidity, optimum nutrition, optimum soil content and density, etc. It is a planned environment created so that growth happens more naturally, more rapidly and ultimately with greater quality than that of the plant left to the randomness of nature. The church ought to function in the same way. Every component of the design of the church ought to be intentional, not accidental. Everything the church is and does ought to be defined by the desired product of Biblical disciples. Programs of the church should not exist simply because “we’ve always done it that way,” but should be intentionally designed, maintained and modified so that growing disciples are the product. In fact, the programs will be different from place to place, from age group to age group, and from culture to culture, but the desired product will still be the same.

Where do small groups fit into the “spiritual greenhouse” we are building? To answer this we must first recognize an important Biblical reality: all small groups are not created equal. Scripture identifies at least four different types of small groups. Obviously Jesus and the twelve is one form of small group. As you look at the big picture it is obvious that this model was never intended to be the means of

PHILOSOPHY OF DISCIPLESHIP (CONTINUED)

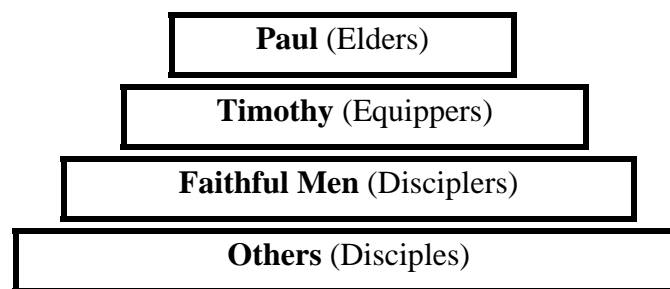
discipling everyone. This type of group was exclusive, not inclusive. Jesus said “no” to certain persons being a part of this group.

It was to be a “mentoring group” which served to develop leaders. Jesus recognized that the best way to minister to the masses was to multiply Himself into the lives of a select few who could help shoulder the burden of ministry. A second type of small group was “ministry groups.” In Luke 10 when Jesus sends out the seventy, he does so by twos. These small groups included both training and practical ministry. A third type of group is what I would call “mixing groups.” These groups blended the body together through nurturing relationships and Christ-centered fellowship. In Acts 2:46 it is said of the first century church that “. . . *breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.*” We know that this had to be a small group function, for the Jerusalem church at this point numbered at least three thousand (Acts 2:41) plus a hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15) and definitely would not all fit in one house. A fourth type of group is “missions groups” that served to expand the ministry of a local church outside its location. This is exemplified in the sending out of Paul and company from the church at Antioch on their mission journeys (Acts 13).

Mentoring groups focus on leadership, while ministry groups focus on training. Mixing groups focus on nurturing while missions groups have a task focus. Each type of small group fills a different purpose in the greenhouse. Importantly, all these small group types are simply some of the components of the whole environment. In addition to these types of small groups, other components include large group gatherings for some of the same functions. In the modern local church, gatherings of all sizes for purposes as broad as teaching, worship, fellowship, prayer, etc. make up the toolbox of ministry. All of these tools, when they are initiated and anointed by God and when they are manned and managed by God-gifted, God-called, and God-burdened individuals, will serve to make the local body function as the spiritual greenhouse it was intended to be. The resulting product will be growing, maturing disciples.

Structure of the Disciple-making Church

One of the factors which determines where the different types of small groups fit as well as where the other components come into play is recognizing the different levels of the discipleship process. In 2 Timothy 2:2 the apostle Paul exhorts Timothy, “*and the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*” In this statement we see reflected four generations of disciples at four different levels of maturity and ministry function.



Paul had invested years of ministry into the life of Timothy who was now the “senior pastor” (so to speak) of the church at Ephesus. 2 Timothy is written near the end of Paul’s life and is often referred to as one of the “Pastoral Epistles” because of its wealth of practical instruction to those in church leadership. What Paul lays out here is a clear schematic of church structure. The entry level for a disciple is the level of others. “Others” are those who desire someone to have a ministry in their lives. This is where the largest number of church members are. It is important to recognize that because of giftedness or faithfulness some will never move beyond this level.

PHILOSOPHY OF DISCIPLESHIP (CONTINUED)

distinction between elders and deacons is that elders are “*able to teach*” (1 Tim.3:2). In 1 Peter 4:10-11 we see spiritual gifts divided into two categories: a) speaking gifts (this would include prophecy, teaching, leading, and exhortation), and b) serving gifts (this would include mercy, giving, and service). Speaking gifts dominate the higher levels of our pyramid.

The third level, Timothys, are those who function as equippers. Ephesians 4:11-12 indicates that God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers “. . . *for the equipping of the saints for the work of service.*” Again, we see that giftedness is a primary consideration for who reaches this level of service. What separates a “Timothy” from a “faithful man” is that a Timothy’s focus is no longer simply ministering *to* people, but rather, ministering *through* people. His job is to equip others for effective ministry.

In the fourth level are the “Pauls;” those who function as elders. “Pauls” are those with the giftedness, maturity, and ministry experience to be able to give vision and direction. These elders function as the generals, marshalling the troops to more effective service. A healthy, mature church will clearly exhibit all four of these levels of maturity and ministry function.

Putting the Pieces Together

In summary, the clear Biblical mandate is that disciple-making is to be placed at the heart of the local church. The central product of the church is to be disciples, those who exhibit an abiding walk with Christ, a heart for the Word, effective prayer, and the fruit of Christian character as well as practical ministry. Though the programs of a church may change, the product never does. We saw that a healthy, mature church will have four levels of maturity and ministry function. It is important to note that what defines a person’s contribution to this process is not simply their maturity and giftedness. The state of the church also defines where a person is, as well as what direction they need to head. If the church is populated entirely by “Others” (disciples), then even a “Paul” (elder) would have to function as a “Faithful Man” until other disciplers were raised up. Once this had taken place, he could then begin to function as a “Timothy” (equipper) and focus on having a ministry through the disciplers God provides. As other equippers are raised up and trained, then and only then could a “Paul” truly function as an elder, keeping the vision of disciple-making at the heart of the church.