

_discipleship: thinking process not program

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What is “discipleship” anyway? A local church family in our community branded their whole children’s ministry area as a ship called the “Disciple Ship.” Pretty cool looking and well-thought-out and hokey-corny all at the same time.

There are a lot of church families who still set aside a night a week for what used to be called “discipleship training.” Various names describe this time. Didactic teaching defines it.

Unfortunately, this kind of thinking is epidemic among church culture in the US. We have made “the Great Commission” given to us from Jesus into nothing more than a program we can package and sell and pull off in 2 hours or less on a Sunday or Wednesday. This is not “discipleship.”

So, what is it? Well, technically speaking, the word “discipleship” doesn’t even exist in the Scriptures. In fact, the very word itself implies a programmed sort of approach, a ship we get on or in so we can participate in something we know we should participate in but would feel better about our participation in it if we actually had a program that applauded our accomplishment in that area. Kind of like bipartisanship and fellowship and sportsmanship. All three are important and necessary, but all three have programmed emphases that supposedly help people do what they should simply be doing naturally because it is that important.

You might say, “That’s semantics.” No it isn’t. Language is important, and if we want something to be more than a program, if we want something to be more about process, then we need to emphasize it in our language. Jesus did. He spoke of “discipleship” not in terms of “discipleship,” but in terms of “discipling.” All of those participle words that end in “ing” imply process. An ongoing emphasis is there when you see that suffix on a word. And it matters cause it matters enough to be doing it and to keep doing it.

And so, we are officially renaming this chapter from this point hither unto forth - “discipling - it was always a non-linear, relational, releasing process.”

And it has always been the central purpose of followers of Jesus. As much as it may hurt some people’s feelings, missions and evangelism are not “The Great Commission.” Jesus described missions as serving anyone and everyone everyday, not just once a year. And, Jesus never divided the concepts we call “evangelism” and “discipleship.” In fact, he seemed to speak of the two as parts of the same process. He called that process “discipling.” And he said that “AS WE GO” in everyday life (not just “go” programmatically or scheduled), we should be discipling.

So, what is it? I want to suggest this basic definition that I believe has profound implication in all of my daily living. Discipling is learning and living the ways of Jesus so that others learn and live His ways, too, so that others learn and live His ways, too, and so on. Discipling is all about proclaiming the message that God has come near, mainly by living like He actually did. As we live His ways, we show His love by how we come near as a friend to the people around us everyday, not only through some service project. That's how other disciples are made – they catch it as we do life with them.

Thus, it is a process. However, it is not and must not be simply a linear process. It is instead a very fluid, ongoing process.

It must not just be about “assimilation.” I suggest this, because getting everybody who visits a worship gathering on Sundays into some program to get them “plugged in” and learn “how we do church around here” has become the goal of “discipling” for many church families. Four-class membership classes can be helpful. Don't get me wrong. That may be helpful in certain contexts. I am simply suggesting that kind of programmed emphasis has too often left us with two very unhealthy results.

First, an assimilation emphasis (or a linear process for discipling) has too often resulted in an end of a “discipling” program rather than a beginning of an ongoing discipling process. Leaders too often give energy into this program rather than into equipping and releasing multiple followers. Those released then engage and disciple multiple friends and hopefully followers to also do the same, and so on.

Second, in that programmed emphasis, we have created linear processes that have in turn created what I will call an imaginary readiness line. When Jesus said, “Come follow Me,” He did not then say, “...and take these four classes so that you shall be ready to be a leader and lead others unto Me.” This has become an unintentional result of this programmed and linear process approach, and has thus resulted in somewhat sterile and timid followers who think more classes might be necessary or they won't know what to say or what to do right so that people can “get right” with God. This is not healthy.

Jesus did certainly do life with those that He called. He certainly did teach them. It could even be argued that He had a flow of what He emphasized with them. However, I would suggest it was a constant “ebb and flow” rather than a linear flow that has a beginning and an end.

Jesus taught His followers over time. He did this in the middle of relationship with them. He did this in the middle of a process that allowed them to learn and live, to be served and to serve, to have both theory and practice. He released them to connect and engage and learn and live and lead others to Him immediately.

It is easy then to conclude that discipling is a process, a multi-tasking kind of process which has as its core value the necessity of doing life together. Since there is not a set, linear process, or at least I am suggesting as such, then what is the process like?

I would suggest three elements. These three do not flow from A to Z. They have more of that ebb and flow. Each may be involved at any one time, while all may be involved at any one time. It's kind of fluid like that, kind of messy like that, kind of unpredictable like that. Kind of like doing life together.

A first element I would suggest for the discipling process is relationship. Every aspect of learning the ways of Jesus and living the ways of Jesus is both validated and authenticated inside relationship. We were made for togetherness. We are stifled when we are alone. The church is people following Jesus together, not an individual. Relationship is paramount.

Discussing the teachings of Jesus requires relationship. In fact, I have seen so often that true transformation happens in the midst of ongoing relational dialogue. That's evident in the discipling process for those who walked face to face with Jesus.

Accountability for living out the teachings of Jesus requires relationship. Our culture pretends that hierarchical structures encapsulate accountability, but forced or enforced accountability is not true accountability at all. When I do something for someone because I have to rather than because I want to, or when I am motivated by obligation rather than love, that is not accountability as described in the New Testament. It is not based in reciprocal relationship. It is not based in love. It is not based in common purpose with the goal of unified restoration and growth. It is you do something for me or you are fired or don't get paid, etc. Accountability doesn't really exist, at least as modeled by Jesus and described in the New Testament, apart from relationship.

Multiplicative results for discipling cannot happen without relationship. Multiplication in the literal sense, of being fruitful and multiplying, can only happen within relationship. In the figurative sense, the necessity for relationship is the same. If we are to see "disciples made," then we must engage people in genuine friendship. Multiplication cannot be programmed. It happens. It blossoms. It is a product of relationships that flourish and have purpose. When we befriend someone, our agenda must be more than just "adding" them to our church membership. Rather, we should walk with them in such a way that they taste and see the love of Jesus, that they witness His ways lived out, and such that they learn His ways and follow. This "happening" of multiplication becomes exponential when it is not constrained by programming standards. It becomes exponential when relationship allows it the freedom to blossom.

A second element I would suggest for the discipling process is discernment. Unfortunately, this element of discipling is often left out within programmed discipleship. Discerning where someone is at spiritually and where someone is going with their life is not required in programmed discipleship. You can simply plug someone into the linear process. Problem is what results is a stifled disciple, which is actually an oxymoron. Let me explain.

As followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit resides within us. Jesus spoke of the many ways having the Holy Spirit matters in the daily life of a follower as recorded in John 14 to 16. Paul follows that with some pretty insightful teaching in 1st Corinthians and Ephesians. John also elaborates on it in 1st John 5. Among the many aspects of what the Spirit does in and through us is discernment.

As we engage people in relationship, we need not only think, "What are the five steps I must take this person through so they will now be a disciple." Maybe a better approach would be to pray something like this:

>> Holy Spirit, please give me discernment into the heart and life of my new friend. Give me Your wisdom and insight so that I may know how to love them right where they are and encourage them for where You want them to go as we walk on this mutual journey with You.

What if we prayed that? Don't you think the Spirit would grant us discernment? Then, we would be pulled into an amazing adventure of learning the ways of Jesus and living out those ways alongside someone into whose life we are speaking encouragement and direction as the Holy Spirit leads us. If we would listen as the Spirit provides this discernment, we would be able to determine where on the journey a person is rather than pigeon-holing them or trying to tritely take them through a step by step process.

This is important. Think about it. When is the last time you met someone at point A? Anyone besides a child born to you? If we discount where someone has already been in their lives, we will miss out on ways God has already been at work in a person's life before we ever met them. Jesus took this seriously. With Peter, Matthew, Mary, Nicodemus, the woman at the well. We must take it seriously, too. It is important for us to realize that discipleship is not a program that begins after someone begins to follow Jesus. It is a process that even begins before "conversion." You can't argue with that principle either, because a cursory reading of the four Gospels make it plain. Jesus invited 12 guys into relationship and entered into a journey with them that God the Father had already been walking on with them. In other words, He had already been at work. He was there through the tragedy and victories of their life previous to their encounter with Jesus. Now, Jesus was going to complete the work that had been begun and continue it toward more and more completion - the discipling process that never ends.

And in that relationship, Jesus discerned where everyone of them were on their journeys. It is important that we do the same. God's Spirit can enable us and pull us into an amazing life-transforming and life-restoring process at the same time, both for the person we are walking with and ourselves included.

Discernment also is more important than degrees and training. The Spirit can make the uneducated to become wise. Thank God for that, because it means I am eligible to be a discipler just like you are eligible. The point is, anyone can do it. Anyone can listen to God's Spirit lead them to walk in relationship with someone and learn/teach the ways of Jesus and live those ways alongside them. Even a caveman could do it.

Bottom line with discernment. If we take this element out of the discipling process and simply plug people into discipleship programs, then we must be okay reaping what we sow. That is, we must be okay with producing stifled disciplers who equate discipling with getting more people into the program. We will reap programmed disciples looking for the next program rather than active disciplers looking for the next relationship. We must sow in such a way that we reap followers who experience the beauty and richness of God's Spirit revealing insight to them and allowing them to be a part of discerning where a person has been and where God is taking them.

A third element of discipling I would suggest is release. I believe it is safe to say that for the most part, church culture has made "discipleship" about retention more than release. People are encouraged to stay in discipleship programs rather than being released to actually be discipling. This is an understanding-church issue. Church gurus keep stressing our need to grow the church, and what they mean is more people in gathering and in small groups. I would suggest that Jesus wants to grow His church out there among the harvest, not in here among those already harvested. The harvest grows out there.

A disciple of Jesus will be seen discipling in the middle of culture, or he/she is no disciple at all. A follower will be fishing, I once heard it said, or he/she is not follower at all. And fishing is not just about "evangelism." Again, Jesus never separated these two concepts. Discipling is fishing. Learning the ways of Jesus and living those ways so that others learn and live them so that others learn and live them and so on. And that happens out there where disciples are released to disciple.

Discipling is more than some class once a week that we market and hope for high attendance. It is eating together. It is praying together. It is having fun together. It is doing things of interest together, and it is serving together. It is doing life together.

That is the model of discipling that we were given by Jesus, but for simplicity sake and for management sake and for ease sake, we boiled it down into a formula and program and said, "Go through this class, and you will be disciples."

It's not that classes aren't important. It's not that gathering together in classes or for collective worship is not important. It's not that we don't need to have Bible study together. These are important, but these can't be the extent of our discipling. I would suggest to you that releasing people to actually be free to engage culture and do life together with people there is both required for and will be evidence of making disciples. However, for this to happen, church leaders must be willing to measure success not by how many they can draw and manage, but by how many they can release and relate with and coach to be discipling far beyond their influence and control.

On the first night that our church family gathered as a core group, we shared four statements with those who gathered. One of them was this - we will not busy you with church activities, but rather we will equip and release you to be the church within your daily and weekly activities. This is a must if we hope for followers of Jesus to actually engage culture and see others being to follow Jesus.

If we stay intent on discipleship as a program, then we will continue to very effectively produce absorbers of Jesus knowledge, which will be very ineffective at making what Jesus asked us to make.

Making more intelligent "Christians" is not the goal of this process. In fact, we have intellectualized and bulletized the message of Christ so much so that culture no longer sees it as spiritually vital, as alive. A key aspect to understand here is that truth is not a concept we learn in a classroom, but a Person we relate to who changes every portion of our lives. If we do not emphasize release as a key element of discipling, then our culture will not encounter the Person that those released are following. In fact, they might not encounter anything of Jesus at all, since His supposed followers will only be entrenched in discipleship classrooms rather than being out among the people Jesus died for.

A good closing question might be this one: what would be the evidence of this kind of discipling process working? Would it be people enrolled in another discipleship class, or people engaged in relationships within culture? Would it be people moving on toward the next step in a discipleship program, or people listening to the Spirit within them involving them in an ongoing, personal journey in which God has been on the move already? Would it be programs grown and people retained or people released and so that the church grows out where Jesus wants it to grow?

Let's surrender our programs and enter into this non-linear, relational, releasing process known as discipling and see what happens.