

DISCIPLESHIP: A Personal Journey and a Church Strategy

Discipleship is a process or journey. Discipleship is not about programs; it is about relationships with God and with His people. Discipleship is not about studying books; it is about knowing and living out God's Word. Discipleship is not about specific times and places; it is about seeing lives transformed by the grace of God. Discipleship is not a program; it is a process.

Disciples begin the journey at different places and travel at different paces reaching toward the same destination or goal—to become more like Jesus. Some may stop along the way; others may take detours, but their destination is to always be Christ-like.

All disciples need to find their places and continue on the journey. Every church must develop a discipleship strategy that helps believers have a great beginning and continue on a lifelong journey of love, trust and obedience to God that transforms their lives so that they think and act like Christ at home, at church, in the community and in the world.

Although the word “discipleship” does not appear in the Bible, “disciple” appears over 230 times. Most often the reference is not just to the twelve disciples who were with Jesus; it usually refers to all disciples of all times.

“Discipleship” is used to denote a person who is committed to mastering the teachings of a specific teacher or leader. There is always the implication of a commitment to emulate the life of the teacher. The Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20, is a clear mandate to make disciples by teaching them to follow or be obedient to the commands of Jesus.

Believers are challenged to present their bodies for a living sacrifice in Romans 12:1-2. They are to be transformed in their minds and to live according to the teachings of God.

Disciples are also to discover, develop and use their spiritual gifts in ministry. In Ephesians 4 Paul writes that individual Christians have been given gifts and that they are to be used for the work of the ministry and for edifying the body of Christ. The end result should be that disciples all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to be more Christ-like.

The journey of discipleship has no closure as long as a person lives. The process helps a new believer have a great beginning to his discipleship journey; nurtures him in a climate for transformation; provides opportunities for his spiritual growth; and helps him discover and use his spiritual gifts.

Leonard Sweet writes, “A disciple of Jesus is a lifelong learner. A disciple's hunger for truth is never satisfied. A pilgrim never quits the pilgrimage.”¹

THE CHURCH AND DISCIPLESHIP

Ephesians 4 gives a biblical description of discipleship. We see the purpose of discipleship as teaching the church to...

- preserve the unity which the Spirit gives (vs. 3)
- recognize spiritual gifts (vs. 7 & 11)
- affirm gifts (vs. 12)
- commission for service and ministry (vs. 11)
- strive toward and attain spiritual maturity (vs. 13)
- stand firm on doctrine and be able to recognize doctrinal errors (vs. 14)
- know when, as led by the Holy Spirit, to lovingly correct (vs. 15)
- continue in spiritual growth (vs. 15)

The result of discipleship is found in Ephesians 4:16: *Under his (Christ's) control all the different parts of the body (the church) will fit together . . . so when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love.* (Today's English Version)

“Church growth comes from within. The biblical principle of equipping the people of God is the hope of the church. It is the church's hope for being built up within by the dynamic of the Christ-life. It is the church's hope for fulfillment of the mission of Jesus in our world.”²

George Barna has said that the typical church evaluates its ministry, but uses relatively meaningless criteria. The most common evaluation criteria are attendance, membership, monies, ratio of pastoral staff to members and size of buildings. Barna's research indicates that those measures are interesting but ultimately insignificant since they do not relate to the church's primary reason for existence--life transformation.³

Jesus gave purpose to His church when He told his followers to make disciples wherever they went (Matthew 28:18-20). Much of the church today is failing to live in the manner modeled and prescribed by Jesus. The church has been given the responsibility of not only introducing the good news of the kingdom, but also for providing nurture for those choosing to identify themselves as a part of it, and to equip them ministry and missions.

The Christian life modeled and accompanied by loving support and accountability will create an environment where nurture more easily occurs. The discipleship strategy of the church should be filtered through Jesus' purpose for the church. Programs and events should not be ends in themselves, but mean to the goal of spiritual maturity.

More specifically, how can the church fulfill her call to nurture believers (make disciples)? It is helpful to remember that becoming like Jesus in character is a lifelong process. As long as there is physical life there is the possibility for continuing spiritual growth.

That process or journey should begin at the point of spiritual birth (John 3:3). Spiritually immature people need to be nurtured in such a way as to facilitate ongoing growth that results in their spiritual maturity. That nurture is personal in that it is tailored to a person and not a program. It is intentional. It is done deliberately as a part of the church's discipleship strategy. And it is foundational. It does not assume biblical knowledge or a prescribed practice (Ephesians 4:21-24; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:8). Throughout the spiritual journey of discipleship, the church must continually create an environment that both encourages and calls into account the maturing disciple (Philippians 3:7-16; Colossians 2:6-7; Hebrews 6:1-2).

Jesus intended that disciples become disciple-makers. As followers of Christ develop and use their spiritual giftedness and become involved in ministry endeavors inside as well as outside the church, non-believers become a part of the kingdom and the process is born again in the life of a new believer (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Peter 4:10).

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¹Leonard Sweet, *Learn to Dance the Soul Salsa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 62.

²Darrell W. Robinson, *Total Church Life* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 111.

³George Barna, *Barna E-Mail Update*, September 25, 2000.