

Introduction to Discipleship and Disciplemaking

What Discipleship Is:

1. A life of continued faith in Christ after one has trusted in Christ for eternal life as Savior and Lord: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness"(Colossians 2:6-7).

2. Living daily in loving obedience to Jesus Christ, and experiencing the love of God through Jesus Christ and his spiritual companionship (Abiding in Christ): "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ therefore is simply living out the reality of having received salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. It is the daily experience of eternal life, since eternal life is a saving relationship with the Son of God (John 17:3).

The Spiritual Benefits of Living as a Disciple:

1. The ministry of the Holy Spirit: "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever -- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-17).

2. Spiritual freedom from bondage to sin: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin . . . So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed'" (John 8:31-32, 34, 36).

3. Effective ministry in the body of Christ and effective witness for Christ: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8).

4. Answered prayer: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

5. The experience of the love of God: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:9-10).

6. The joy of Christ: "I have told you [these things] (about obedience and abiding) so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Therefore, living as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ has everything to do with one's earthly satisfaction in being his follower. The reason why many believers are dissatisfied with their lives has more to do with the quality of their obedience to Christ and their daily relationship with him than with anything else. The quality of their faithfulness to Christ determines their daily awareness of him, their daily satisfaction in him and their daily usefulness for him.

The Spiritual Potential for Living as a Disciple:

Each and every believer who is truly saved by faith in Jesus Christ and is truly born again of the Spirit of God has the spiritual potential for being a fully submitted and fruitful disciple, as the work of the grace of God in salvation: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

Being an obedient disciple to Christ has nothing to do with "works salvation," meaning the idea that the acts of obedience to the will of Christ have anything to do with earning or deserving eternal life. Rather, it is the demonstration of having received salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, that the person's faith is genuine by the reality of being a new creation in Christ.

The Mark of Genuine Discipleship:

Christlike love toward other believers: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

The Ultimate Motivation for Living as a Disciple:

The realization of facing Jesus personally at the judgment seat, and being personally accountable to him: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (II Corinthians 5:10).

Everyone is ultimately responsible to Jesus Christ, and will receive his personal evaluation on the quality of his or her life on earth. The faithful disciple's motivation is his desire to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," at the time that he sees his Lord face to face.

What Disciplemaking Is:

Teaching believers in Christ to obey Christ. It means passing on his Word with the expectation of obedience. Tragically, many believers are educated with Bible facts far beyond their obedience to the expectations of Jesus Christ.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

The responsibility of disciplemaking thus is upon the entire church of Jesus Christ, since the day that this command was issued. Thus disciplemaking must take place primarily through the church and its God ordained expression in the local church. Parachurch organizations have been useful in assisting local churches to make disciples, but they have no call or ministry to make disciples independent of the local church. The God ordained leaders of local churches have more of a definite scriptural responsibility to lead the church of Jesus Christ to make disciples.

The Goal of Disciplemaking:

Spiritual maturity in Christ: "Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28, Revised Standard Version).

The Means of Disciplemaking:

THE WORD OF GOD: "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage -- with great patience and careful instruction" (II Timothy 3:16-4:2).

Personal experience, however genuine and personally uplifting, is out of place and irrelevant when it comes to making disciples. The disciple maker is not seeking to make others like himself and follow his word and example but to guide them to be like Christ and follow his word and example. Thus, the disciple maker must base all his instruction solidly upon the Word of God, because that is what God has inspired -- not his personal experience.

The Place of Disciplemaking:

The Church of Jesus Christ, in the atmosphere of love, truthfulness, and loving exercise of spiritual gifts: ". . . speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

New Testament discipleship is church based. Thus, every Bible believing church must consider its mission as developing its congregation into consistent disciples of Jesus Christ.

True growth takes place where believers also know and exercise their spiritual gifts. Whatever a person's or denomination's views on the cessation and regulation of the "sign" gifts (tongues, interpretation, prophecy, miracles and healing), a church is the proper place for this to be taught and put into practice. It then follows that parachurch organizations rarely deal with this issue (except on the issue of the "sign" gifts) to avoid interdenominational controversy, and thus do not provide a crucial aspect of growth in Christ that properly comes through a local church.

The Responsibility of Disciplemaking:

Spiritual leaders within the body of Christ have the God-given capability and responsibility to lead the others in the church to effective ministry and spiritual maturity: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Spiritual leaders are to bend every effort to impart all the will of God in their ministries of formal preaching and teaching and informal conversations; this ministry requires TIME, PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE, FORETHOUGHT, PERSONAL STUDY AND PRAYER, A LOVING, CHRISTLIKE SPIRIT OF SERVANTHOOD AND DEEP EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHERS: "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house . . . I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God . . . Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20: 20, 27, 31).

Reasons for Neglect of Disciplemaking:

1. Ignorance or a superficial understanding of the scriptures on discipleship and disciplemaking.
2. A mistaken view of saving faith as mere mental assent to the facts about Christ, and neglect of the Biblical view of trust in him for eternal life and submission to his Lordship (see Romans 10:9-10 and Luke 6:46-49). Again, a superficial understanding of grace and faith in Christ is at the bottom of this, and often a desire to get a large number of "decisions" for Christ without having presented the call of Christ for those who are saved to follow him.
3. An overemphasis on evangelism, especially as a pastoral responsibility (emphasis on II Timothy 4:5 to the detriment of other scriptures). The pastor of a church devotes himself or is expected to devote himself entirely to evangelism, with the result that his personal ministry of disciplemaking is neglected.
4. A sentimental attachment to a status quo where disciplemaking is neglected (a preference for "old wine" -- Luke 5:39). Disciplemaking has nothing to do with "the way we've always done things around here," and thus is pushed off to the side.

5. A complacent self-satisfaction with one's own and others' spiritual state (see Revelation 3:17). The person who has received salvation considers his own spiritual state secure despite a lack of love for Christ and for fellow believers, a lack of zeal for Christ, and a lack of spiritual vision. Usually this is based upon security in outward circumstances and in church attendance.

Common Substitutes for Discipleship and Disciplemaking:

1. Just Church Attendance: this leads to evangelical churchianity, where a person bases his Christian growth and experience on church attendance and social conformity to others in the church. The danger is that the church as a social group replaces Christ and his Word. See Revelation 3:1-2.

2. Overemphasis on extrabiblical teachings and commands based upon human tradition: this leads to legalism, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. What is good advice is not the same as the Word of God! Moreover, because this must rely entirely upon human willpower, this life is lived entirely in the flesh. See Colossians 3:16-23.

3. Spiritual and pseudo spiritual experiences: this leads to the believer becoming a spiritual thrill seeker, dependent upon emotions and experiences, and susceptible to spiritual counterfeits. See II Corinthians 11:2-4, 13-15.

4. Limited series of follow-up lessons: better than nothing by far! Yet the tendency is to make following Christ too much like a do-it-yourself project, without the personal ministry of a spiritual leader to encourage, pray and assist with problems. It often means that a spiritual baby has only enough guidance and nourishment to grow to become a spiritual toddler, and not to full maturity in Christ.

5. Nothing at all! An overconfidence in "eternal security" means that many are led to "decisions" for Christ but abandoned immediately to the world. The result is the thousands of stillborn disciples who become even more hardened to the gospel!

Consequences of Spiritual Immaturity: The Symptom of Ineffective Discipleship and Disciplemaking:

1. Susceptibility to false and distorted teaching because of spiritual instability: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14).

Pseudo Christian cults such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses have a number of members who once claimed conversion in a solidly evangelical church. Others who claim to know Christ accept unBiblical teachings such as reincarnation and follow unBiblical practices such as astrology, fortune telling, etc. Still others fall to groups whose doctrinal statements are definitely scriptural but who also exercise cultish control over their members, cultish separation from other genuine believers and cultish intrusion of legalistic teaching.

2. Church conflict and divisions and cliques inside a church: "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as [carnal] -- mere infants in Christ . . . For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not [carnal]? Are you not acting like mere men (the unsaved)? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men?" (I Corinthians 3:1, 3-4).

Much of the problem of intrachurch rivalry, cliques and divisions come down to spiritual immaturity. The church has not built mature disciples, and is simply a spiritual nursery school, where nursery school behavior is tolerated: name calling, backbiting, bullying, etc.

3. Inability to progress beyond elementary lessons and need of continuous reinforcement even on these: ". . . you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:11-14).

4. Demonstration of lack of love to Christ and actual rejection of God's Word: "He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me" (John 14:23).

This declares the personal attitude of Christ toward the professed disciple who lives in actual disobedience toward him. He views his rejection of his Word as not only personal rejection, but as an actual rejection of God the Father.

5. Infiltration of scandalous sins into the fellowship of the church: "I am afraid that when I come again . . . I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged" (II Corinthians 12:21).

Note: the "addictive" and "dysfunctional" compulsions and characteristics described in the modern recovery movement are the secularization of the description of carnality and life dominating sins found in the Bible. Moreover, the Twelve Step is also the secularization of the process of moral responsibility and accountability found in the Bible. Thus, these compulsions and characteristics when they occur in the life of a professed believer in Christ are actually discipleship issues.

Therefore, spiritual immaturity has nothing to do with physical age, time spent in church or Sunday School attendance or Biblical knowledge but with the manner of living of a person who claims to know Christ. A person with substantial Biblical knowledge, years of church attendance, or gray hair can be spiritually immature through a consistent demonstration of the behavioral marks of spiritual immaturity.

Personal discipline Is Required for Effective Discipleship and Disciplemaking:

" . . . train yourself to be godly" (I Timothy 4:7).

Discipleship training will require discipline in basic spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, study, meditation and memorization, developing a consistent prayer time, church attendance and involvement. Discipline is simply doing the next thing that you know that is right for you to do in obedience to God, regardless of how you feel or what others say, and then going on to the next thing when you have completed that.

A Strong and Deep Commitment to Fellow Believers Is Part of Growing Together as Disciples:

"See to it, brothers, that none of you have a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:12-13).

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

These verses call for more than mere church attendance and superficial social fellowship. They call for the development of a relationship so close, loving, compassionate and honest with other believers that any one of you can share with the other what will genuinely be for that person's spiritual good.

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For Group Discussion: put together a description of a mature disciple.

Personal Study: describe the circumstances of your conversion on the back of this paper.

Do you personally read the Word of God: daily ___ weekly ___ every two weeks ___ almost never ___ ?

Do you have a: daily time of personal prayer ___ using prayer journal or notebook ___ family prayer ___

Do you know your spiritual gift(s)? Write them down here.

What have you done lately to exercise that gift?

Do you attend a local church: weekly ___ monthly ___ almost never ___ ?

Do you have a personal ministry in that church, such as teaching?

What actions of yours can you write down that would describe how you have shown the love of Christ to another believer in Christ in the past month?

What specific training have you had to be able to witness?

Has anyone ever taken the time to guide you how to study the scriptures, pray, witness, and other basic lessons of following Christ?