

Discipleship in the Church

Introduction

What is the mission of the local church?

How would we know if we are successful in that mission? (multiplying effective home groups)

What is the fundamental core of multiplying home groups? (multiplying Christian workers through the discipling ministry)

Discipleship in the church

The biblical case for discipleship

The case is established both by precept and principle. We are using this term, "discipleship" in a way different than the bible uses it. The bible does not talk about workers having disciples, but rather people being disciples of Christ. It doesn't make it wrong for us to use it referring to people we are discipling, but we are on safer ground just demonstrating the work of discipleship.

Jesus' example: Mark 3:13-15 (Coleman). We see Christ being with them and sending them out.

Jesus' command: Matthew 28:19-20 – we are teaching others to be disciples of CHRIST, not us. Teaching them to observe what Christ teaches, not us. The central imperative is "make disciples".

Paul's example: Colossians 1:28,29; 1 Timothy 1:2 & 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4 (30 other disciples mentioned) We could probably argue that this is most important ministry (note the strong language in Col. 1). Note also the language he uses to describe Timothy – "beloved son" does not likely mean he led Timothy to Christ, but that he trained or mentored him. Likewise also with Titus.

Paul's command: 2 Timothy 2:2

Why is this so important?

There were two great preachers in England in the 1800's. John Wesley and George Whitefield. One was a greater speaker and had a greater ability to reach the multitudes - Whitefield.

However, Wesley had the greater long-term impact. Why? Discipleship. He was committed to discipling the people he led to Christ so that they would be able to do the same. This led Whitefield to say toward the end of his career that he had woven a "rope of sand".

We see quality over quantity, core over crowd, cell over program. Yet it leads to far greater quantity.

In other words, we are comparing addition versus multiplication growth. One person reaching 100 people for Christ every year but not teaching them how to do the same, versus one person reaching one person for Christ every other year, but also discipling them to do the same.

In 50 years, the 1st has reached 5,000 people for Christ. And, his outreach ministry ends when he dies.

In the same 50 years, the 2nd has effectively reached 16,777,216 people.

QUALIFICATION: We are NOT saying that this exact progression will or should be seen – the evil one would have a hay-day with that interpretation and has in our church. But the biblical principle is essential

to the church's health and growth nonetheless and is explosive. The church must also be involved in cross-cultural work that will not be as easy, rendering the calculated model inaccurate.

Why don't people/churches practice biblical discipleship?

- They do not understand the principle

Roulette wheel example (if you knew it would turn up "17 black" at a particular time, how much would you wager on it – everything you had right?), we have to know that God will deliver. His approach is correct.

- They are too carnal

Won't be glorifying enough, behind the scenes, many times years of work; the desire to control (build a personal kingdom). Addicted to stimulation/ worldly values. This is where the heart of sacrifice of materialistic goals gets laid on the altar. Will I use God's time to invest in the lives of younger Christians? I will need to sacrifice worldly goals to be effective at this.

- Lack of patience

Illustration: too impatient to garden because we can't see plant growing. It requires years of sacrificial work as we talked about with follow-up last week (time, money, thought-life). We live in a quick-fix culture and this ministry flies in the face of that.

- Throwing the baby out with the bath water: "I tried it and it didn't work." The person walks away so the worker gives up on doing discipleship altogether (instead of learning what God might have taught you through this failure, you just jettison the method);

Or someone experienced abuse in a discipling relationship and throws it out.

Or, I did it with the wrong mindset – legalistically, thinking that it was all up to me, not directing them to the power of God.

Discipleship in Xenos

Our first task, then, is to hammer out a definition of discipleship that we can all hold in common. We need a definition that is broad enough to encompass the variables involved, but specific enough to provide some focus and direction for us.

A discipler is one, who like Paul in Col. 1:28, 29 strives to present people mature ("complete") in Christ in the two key areas of God's will for every believer: sanctification and ministry.

Therefore, in Xenos we define it: "A discipler is one who helps willing people attain Servant Team status by both ministering in a general way in the church, and by holding specific meetings for study, coaching, counseling, and prayer (in the context of a close personal relationship)." Let's unpack this definition phrase by phrase.

"helps willing people attain Servant Team status" - We could have said "helps people become godly Christian workers," but we have intentionally said this because in Xenos, the Servant Team is our cadre of relatively mature Christian workers, so this is the goal. We need to have a goal that is concrete enough that we know when we have attained it. Although we will continue to help our disciples beyond this point, it will be more as colleagues.

Note these qualifications:

- It does not mean you have to be on the Servant Team before you disciple someone.
- It does not mean you have arrived because you are on the Servant Team.
- It also does not mean that they have to aspire to be on the Servant Team before you should disciple them.

Some of us will play a key role toward this goal, but not be the one who takes them all the way there (JR. HIGH & HIGH SCHOOL WORKERS).

Notice the word "willing." A disciple is a learner (*mathetes*)--one who is eager to be instructed. Not everyone in the church is in this state (1 Thessalonians 5:14 - weak, faint-hearted, unruly). But many are ready and willing to learn. These are the ones to whom we should give more intensive instruction. SEE HULL, TDMC, p. 41 & HULL, TDMP, pp. 168-173.

"by both ministering in a general way in the church" - Unlike discipleship models which emphasize only one-on-one discipleship, we recognize that discipleship also requires a corporate dimension--important input from a variety of other Christian workers and friends. Even Jesus disciplined people in the context of a community, and healthy home group and wider church involvement forms the foundational healthy environment for the development of younger Christians.

The shots I take with people in home church (to encourage, admonish, answer questions, etc.) are a real aspect of their development. The work I do teaching classes, home church, etc. also contributes to the discipleship task of many people.

"and by holding specific meetings for study, coaching, counseling, and prayer" - On the other hand, discipling people involves intentional and focused investment. When a group relies only on the influence of general ministry to get the job done, willing people don't develop as quickly as they could. "Everyone's job is no one's job." So we need to initiate interactions that are specifically designed to help them develop. There are many variables that require us to be flexible in how we spend this time.

Some of us make our main contribution in cell groups by what we teach and how we interact with them before and afterward. We need to resist the notion that if the people in our cell groups are in Christian Principles, they are getting what they need. They need repetition and depth in their biblical knowledge, and they need personal models and input. Cell groups are a unique opportunity for this.

Many of us will supplement this with a regular additional time with one or two folks who are particularly eager and promising. We will spend this time focusing on what they seem to need at the time--sometimes additional study, sometimes helping them face and resolve sin-problems in their own lives, sometimes coaching them in their developing ministries with others. Over a period of time, we will want to address all of these areas, and we will always (in my opinion) include prayer with them.

I think we need to avoid rigid uniformity here, and we need to avoid using the flexibility as an excuse to neglect intentional investment ("I like the way I do it better than the way you don't do it").

"(in the context of a close personal relationship)" - Even Jesus, though he was Lord and Master in a way we never are, called his disciples his "friends" who knew what he was doing (John 15:15). And Paul called the people he was discipling, "beloved children." Having a regular meeting does not guarantee that discipleship is occurring. Much that must be passed on (character; reciprocal vulnerability; discernment;

response to situations; resolving conflict; actually ministering together, etc.) requires time, interaction, and experiences outside meetings.

Taking initiative

"Everybody's job is nobody's job" (sound familiar from last week's discussion on follow-up?)

- Individuals need to take initiative. We should assume that we will be involved in discipling the people that we bring around, and thus we should take some initiative, while at the same time communicating with the leaders.

In a good home church there should be workers looking for people to disciple, hungry to serve in this manner.

- The leaders of a group need to help coordinate and oversee the discipleship provisions within the group. (Each person who is ready to be disciplined has some provision, if possible.)

The point is: New Christians need to have someone initiate with them, and this should be coordinated at the home church level. Without this, home churches get full but are unable to plant.

Errors to avoid

We've been committed to personal discipleship in Xenos for many years, and we've benefited greatly from it. We've also made many mistakes in this area, and we need to be sure that we learn from our mistakes. Here are the ones that come to my mind.

"I've got to get a disciple right now." This sometimes happens in home groups that strongly emphasize discipleship. Getting a person becomes a hoop to jump through so we can say we are discipling someone. We grab a person and try to force-feed them, rather than prayerfully finding someone who wants to learn what we're suited to teach them.

"I am totally responsible for the growth of my disciples." This is another form of legalism, and it leads to excessive force, manipulation, overstepping our bounds (DATING RESTRICTIONS; SIGNING IN & OUT OF MINISTRY HOUSES; etc.)--and ultimately to failure and discouragement. We had a lot of this in the early 1980's, and we're still living it down (DEN'S RECENT REPORTS). Let's stay away from this, and give people the freedom to make decisions!

"Stay away from my disciple." (TERRITORIALITY) There have been cases where disciplers have gotten very possessive of disciples to the point of fighting over disciples - fighting over who gets to disciple a new convert, keeping other disciplers away from "my" disciple; people trying to "take over" another person's disciple, etc. Coleman's use of the example of Christ breaks down here because we are not sufficient as he is, nor do we have his authority. Ultimately, they are not my disciples at all--they are Jesus'. I am only assisting them by helping them learn how to follow and obey him. The goal is not for me to hoard disciples, but to develop younger Christians. That means I will not only be glad that they get quality input from other workers, but I will also deliberately expose them to other quality workers.

"I've got to be able to raise up leaders as effectively as so-and-so." (COMPARISON) This is a very common form of legalism for all areas of ministry, and it provides a fertile soil for accusation. Learn the lesson of "NO LITTLE PEOPLE!" Do your work under grace, as unto the Lord, trusting him for results--and be content that you are pleasing him.

"I've got to disciple others in exactly the same way so-and-so does." OR "People I disciple need to turn out to be just like me." (Illustration: brick layer vs. stone mason) Proper uniformity = "Every mature Christian should be involved in discipleship and just about every disciple could eventually help lead a home group."

"I can't be effective because I was never disciplined one-on-one by a mature worker." Being disciplined by a proven discipler is an advantage. This is why you should pursue being disciplined if you can. But you can learn how to disciple others even if you didn't receive textbook discipling. However, don't use this as an excuse to avoid sacrificially investing in the life of younger believers to help them grow.

"Everyone in our home group should have one-on-one discipleship time if they want it." This monopolizes workers' time and eventually burns them out. It also takes them away from ministering in their gifted areas, and gets them focused equally on hungry and unhungry people.

"I'm not a leader/gifted at/mature enough to disciple, so I needn't be involved in it." Some of us are more gifted at this than others--especially in leadership duplication. But the definition of discipleship we're using now is broad enough for all of us to participate, and we agreed to do this when we signed the Servant Covenant.

"If our people are going to classes and serving in ministry team roles, that's all they need." This is the program-based fallacy that leads to a superficial workforce. They need repetition and depth in biblical content beyond what the classes can give them. They need personal models and input that classes and ministry team roles cannot give them. They need to develop foundational ministry skills that are best developed in a home group/discipleship context (outreach; body-life; developing spiritual gifts). I worry that many people in Xenos these days view "ministry involvement" primarily in terms of having a titled role (EXAMPLES) rather than developing these areas. The point is not that titled roles are bad; it is that these are more important.

"No one is interested in being disciplined." This may be true in your present situation. If so, are you praying for someone who is? But it may not be true--you may be too negative. Pray that God open your eyes to see the willing hearts!

So here are ten dangers to avoid – are you going to use them as an excuse to not get involved in this fulfilling ministry, or to be grown in your usefulness to the Lord in this central ministry?

Practical Advice on Discipling Others

Shepherding vs. Discipling

This is an important and helpful distinction in working with younger Christians. Shepherding and discipling differ in three key areas:

- Shepherding emphasizes *the other person's own spiritual growth*. "I'm feeding them." Although their ministering to others may well come up, your main purpose is in giving nurture, counsel, admonition, biblical instruction to help them get established in their walks with God. Discipleship, however, emphasizes their now *ministering to others*. "I'm teaching them to feed others also." Personal growth issues are addressed, but the main focus is on how to become an effective Christian worker.
- Shepherding is *unconditional* – we do it freely and with no expectations of a reciprocal response. Discipleship, however, is *conditional*. Do they really want to be a worker? We

should ask them if they want to get together so that you can help them grow, if shepherding is the goal. If they take more interest in the things of God, and you'd like to help disciple them, you should ask if they would like to get together more frequently so that you can help them learn how to be used by God. The transition from shepherding to discipleship is gradual. But if you move into a discipleship relationship, you should make it clear there will be expectations and accountability, and spell them out. Be willing to step back if they won't do their part--but still love them as before. This is important both for the work of discipleship and to avoid "bait and switch" relationships.

- Shepherding is normally *sporadic and ongoing*. You help people as they need it and are open to it, and as you are burdened and available. Discipleship, however, is normally *consistent and for a period of time*. You meet with the person on a regular basis with the understanding that the day will come when they will be doing this with others. This doesn't imply that you spell this desire out early in the relationship, nor at the point where they are now investing in others that you stop getting together with them.

Both of these ministries are critical to help young Christians move forward in their relationship with Christ. The leader must model the importance of shepherding. An excellent time for this includes after home group meetings where we would be less likely to fellowship with people we disciple, and more likely with people who need shepherding.

Why is shepherding so important?:

1. It builds home group unity.
2. It enables you to help other workers and disciplers. You may gain discernment on the young believers situation that helps the person working with them.
3. It's key to proper selection of who to disciple. If you are not't shepherding, then you can't make good selection.
4. It gives you the opportunity to model ministry to your disciples.

Selection

Avoid committing to a discipleship relationship with someone you should just be shepherding. Don't say "yes" just because someone asks you to disciple them. Instead, shepherd them in love and *prayerfully* watch their lives. Without being perfectionistic, prayerfully consider the following questions:

- *Do they evidence ongoing interest in the word?* John 8:31,32
- *Are they honest about what is really going on in their life?* Luke 8:15
- *Do they ask spiritual questions and respond to good answers?* This demonstrates genuine interest. Or do they only seem want to spend time with you without expressing real interest in spiritual things?
- *Do they take initiative in ministering to others?* Demonstrates an ability to get outside of themselves. Or do they always have to be asked to serve? Are they interested in people, forming relationships with people in the group, etc.?

- *Do they respond properly to God's discipline (through others and directly from God)? Or do they always have to be corrected by people, agree but don't act, etc.?*
- *Do they take challenging steps of faith? They are demonstrating that their relationship with God, and his promises, is real to them and impacts their lives. (EXAMPLES: financial giving; confessing sin; witnessing; confronting)? Or do they usually stay in their comfort zone?*
- *Do they have/make the time to commit to the group? Or are they chronically preoccupied with other matters (see 2 Timothy 2:4).*

If the answers to these questions are basically yes, then we need to be willing to get in there with them even if they have rough edges.

Some people will have qualities that are more irritating to us that tend to disqualify them in our minds (complainers, divisive, arguers, passive, self-centered).

Beware of OUR own tendencies to be overly critical or non-discerning.

Prayer is an essential precursor to effective discipling.

Solicit the input of other mature workers before committing to a discipling relationship.

If the answers to these are basically no, be wary of committing to a discipling relationship even if they are attractive in other areas (gifting, personal charisma, winner in the world, they like the same hobbies you like, etc.)

We will not find someone is all good or all bad, there will be a mix. Be skeptical, but not overly negative on people. Direction of movement is more important than present state. Remember it is God who is at work Phil. 2:13; 1 Corinthians 3:7.

Discipleship Time

In addition to common meetings and social time, you should have a regular, weekly time set aside specifically for discipleship. Very few people can disciple others effectively "on the fly." At least one hour, preferably longer, and weekly is needed. Here are some things that make this time productive:

- *This should be weekly, one-on-one, for at least an hour.*
- *Think carefully and prayerfully beforehand (Hebrews 10:24)! Otherwise, you will be reacting, catching up, etc. Do you have vision for them? What issues need to be addressed?*

At the same time, they should be bringing up questions about their own walk, ministry, scripture, etc. A disciple is a "learner." If they are just passively receiving and responding, this is not a good sign.

- *Discuss ministry issues.* If you are discipling someone to become a Christian worker, there are always ministry-related issues to discuss. EXAMPLES: advice about people they're witnessing to, following up with new people, discipling others, talking about the health of the home group, etc.

At the appropriate time, ask, "Who are you discipling/investing in?" Most do not naturally gravitate toward this ministry; they need to be challenged. All they really need is the commitment to be consistent with someone and be a step ahead of them. If they are busy doing ministry they are effective in, ask them how they are discipling others in that ministry.

Help them in their discipleship work. This communicates how important this work is. Ask how it is going. Express genuine interest and excitement for any progress. Warn them and counsel them about the most common errors to avoid. Counsel them against tendencies toward overly controlling versus passivity, naive optimism versus negativity, etc.

- *Pray together.* Pray about the things you discussed, the people you are working with, personal issues, gratitude for your relationship, etc. This teaches the importance of prayer in ministry, how to pray biblically, etc. This should be part of every time you get together.
- *Discuss personal sanctification issues they arise.* This shouldn't be wooden or clinical. Rather, as issues arise naturally in marriage, ministry, etc., address them. If you aren't willing to do this, you won't succeed. There should be mutual freedom to bring up these kinds of issues. Often this is a more frequent topic earlier in the relationship and as they mature, and become more involved in ministry, less so. But it should not be a weekly topic; we should be responsive as issues emerge. Overall, you'd like them to understand where their besetting sins are and help them develop a strategy to lean against them. This is a process; don't invert Gal. 5:16.
- *Study – developing a biblical mindset (2Tim.2:15)*
Have a study plan. Getting into biblical content together regularly is important for both ministry equipping and mutual edification. The biblical content may vary according to the need and maturity of those involved—e.g., reading and discussing a book of the Bible, doing an inductive study, reading and discussing a quality Christian book, going over class material, etc. While your time together should not be study only (see above), don't let this key part get crowded out. With younger Christians, it is particularly important to study with them regularly, and to help them prepare any teachings they are giving.
Examples:
 - Daily Bible reading plan
 - Read and discuss your way through a biblical book
 - Overview whole biblical books
 - Read and discuss solid Christian books
 - Review class material, or take a class together and discuss it afterward

You will need to decide which of these elements to emphasize according to a number of variables (urgent needs or opportunities, maturity of the disciple, considering if the circumstances are right – you might be ready to admonish and realize the time isn't right, what you talked about recently, beware of your own tendencies, understand their personality and how it should be approached, etc.). We need to not only prepare, we need to be ready and able to respond on the spot. 2 Timothy 4:2b be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

As you develop as a discipler, you will have more than one person at different stages of spiritual growth – sanctification and ministry development.

Conclusion: The benefits of doing discipleship

- It is personally fulfilling because it is so significant. 3 John 1:4 – I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth. 1 Thessalonians 2:19,20.
- Ministry as a means of growth is highlighted by a committed discipling ministry. Our sanctification is dependent on our investing in this manner.
- They are usually your very closest friends.
- We will win in home group ministry if we are discipling. We can work through a lot of problems in home group if we remain stable in our discipling of others.