

Leadership Development – 2.2 New Testament Discipleship

Being a Disciple is probably one of the least known and understood terms for Christians. Many presume that because you make a profession of faith in Jesus as savior that you are automatically a disciple. This was not what the First Century AD Christians understood. Scripturally, discipleship meant that sometime after Jesus has become my personal Savior, Spiritual growth and maturity brings about the desire for Jesus to become the Lord of my life and I purposefully become caught up in furthering Jesus' mission in redemptive history. We will now explore some thoughts about discipleship in the 1st Century AD:

1. Key Discipleship concepts and their brief definitions are as follows:
 - a. Discipleship: the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus, where knowledge and wisdom are desirable, but the main objective is to cultivate a heart that knows and loves God, and that desires to be transformed into the likeness of our Lord Jesus. Disciples love Jesus and earnestly look for Him, long to be like Him, and live to serve Him. "God's ultimate purpose is that His Son might be exhibited in me" – Oswald Chambers. [Proverbs 23:12; Ecc 2:26; Hab 2:14; Luke 1:77; John 4:23; Rom 12:1; 1Cor 13; 2Cor 3:17-18].
 - b. Disciple – An individual being progressively transformed into the character and likeness of Jesus. This transformation is a process that involves both mind and heart, and results in 1) A Biblical change of values and motives, 2) A growing desire for the crucifixion of the sin nature 3) The deliberate submersion of the self in Christ, and 4) living evidence of spiritual fruit observable in my life [Gal 5:19-23]. Disciples are Spirit dependent Christians who are actively initiating Spirit-life interaction with other disciples [Biblical Literacy & Spiritual Formation]. They are also reproducing by engaging the society and culture in which they live and work [evangelism outreach], and they are fully committed followers of Jesus Christ [leaders]. They live life in community where worship, expectations, responsibilities, and hope are defined and experienced. Individual discipleship contains components of vertical relational interaction – between the disciple and God, and horizontal relational interaction – between disciples within community. Disciples are all about expressing relational intimacy with God and with others, with the priority of "being the Church" [e.g.: substance issues of lifestyle, nature and character formation] rather than "doing church" [e.g.: form issues including what, where, when, and how].
 - c. Spiritual life – Is human Spiritual Transformation – the term "Christian" was used to describe disciples as "Little Christ's" – people who reflected Jesus' life priorities, character and nature. A primary goal of Spiritual Life is the reclamation of – 1) The individual [personal transformation], and 2) the reclamation and restoration of the human race [reconciliation with God]. The great danger that arises is when we don't experience authentic transformation... this is what we settle for and what might be called "pseudo-transformation" – meaning if we will not be transformed, we will settle for being "informed" or "conformed." Being informed or conformed is not inherently bad, but it is a much lessor good than Spiritual transformation. Spiritual life is inherently supernatural, and it is necessarily based upon a disciple's love and dependence on God.

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- d. **Spiritual leader** – is a person of character and integrity who captivates others and challenges them to become like him as they follow Jesus. Leaders lead by example, not merely by authority. Spiritual leaders see Life in the Spirit and are attracted to God.
 - e. **Church** – is bifurcated into spheres:
 - i. **“Church”** [upper-case “C”] is the organic Body of Jesus – those who are intimately united with God and fellow disciples through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. **“church”** [lower-case “c”] is the organization that allows for the programmatic and corporate place of meeting as a group.
 - iii. The former [Church as organism] is perfect from the interior work of our Savior as a result of His 1st Coming, the latter [church as organization] is subject to the failings of fallen man and the broken world order that will not be restored until all things are made new at Jesus’ 2nd Coming.
 - iv. **Church age** – the period of time between Jesus’ 1st Coming and His 2nd Coming.
- 2. New Testament Cultural Norms for Discipleship:**
- a. There appears to have been a widespread acceptance of being and becoming a disciple of a renowned master/rabbi.
 - i. This was much more than a regional phenomenon, but some areas were more prone to support this commitment. The Focus on the Family presentation of “The Dust of the Rabbi” DVD investigated the discipleship norms operant at the time of Jesus and concludes that the northern region of Galilee was actually the Spiritual epicenter of Jewish discipling, not the South where Jerusalem was located.
 - ii. It would seem more reasonable to presume that since the Southern territory of Jerusalem was more politically active and motivated, that there would have been more Spiritual life as well. Instead, the south had more people emerging as revolutionary leaders of a political nature, while the north had more people engaged in Spiritual life.
 - iii. The combination of the spiritual emphasis of the North and the political emphasis of the dominating the South produce an interesting tension and dynamic with Messiah Jesus being a Spiritual leader rather than a political one... putting Jesus on a collision course with the Jewish political leadership.
 - b. Elsewhere in the Ancient Near East and Far East religious culture encouraged older men especially in India and Asia to become “wandering holy men” in their later life after they have raised family and secured economic security for their wife and grown children.
 - i. There was an acceptance of a transient or even nomadic holy man prevalent in the greater geographical area as men got closer to their mortality and they became more focused on faith and eternity.

- ii. There is evidence of this trend in other cultural/religious systems especially in India, China, and Greece... where religious and philosophical concepts were an important part of community life.
- iii. The Jewish cultural precedent of youths entering into a life-long religious commitment of discipleship in community long preceded the trends in Hindu or Buddhist culture where youths entered into monastery life at a young age.

3. Cultural Building Blocks for Jewish Discipleship:

a. Jewish Disciples were Life Learners:

- i. A disciple bound himself to a rabbi to gain an understanding of their worldview and practical living. The rabbi's student was known as a *Talmud*, derived from the Hebrew verb meaning "to learn." The goal of disciples in the Greco-Roman world was to live as the gods live. This was true for their schools of philosophy and mystic religion. Thus, there were many similarities in the goals of discipleship in the Greek and Jewish worlds.
- ii. The disciple always had a master and became his constant companion. Any credible rabbi was followed by a circle of disciples who observed and listened intently to his teaching. One would observe a rabbi being followed by a group of disciples, walking a few feet behind him. Eventually, a disciple would become learned enough to become a rabbi and find his own following.
- iii. The cultural understanding of discipleship in Jesus' day was evident in those who would follow Him. Yet, what made Jesus' ministry distinct from that of the religious leaders also made His discipleship different from certain cultural norms. For example, Jesus instructed His disciples to make distinctions between their discipleship and that of the prevalent Jewish rabbis in Matthew 23:2-4: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."
- iv. Jesus then speaks bluntly of the Jewish Rabbi's disingenuous nature Matthew 23:5-7 – "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi'."
- v. Jesus also warned them about how they should see themselves as "disciplers" in Matthew 23:8-11: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and He is in heaven."

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Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant.”

b. Jewish Disciples were Students of Scripture:

- i. Jewish disciples learned the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as the oral traditions, Talmud and Midrash. Theological interpretation was left to the rabbi, which led to various competing schools of thought among the rabbis. The practice of discipleship was also prominent in Greek society, with Socrates and Plato among prominent examples of teachers with followings. Study was a means and an end in Greek thought.
- ii. The Greek philosophers would engage people in public places over teachings, and often used the means of asking questions, known as the “Socratic Method.” Jesus also asked questions to help people engage the truths of God’s Word. This continued in the post-ascension period with Paul.

c. Jewish Discipleship occurred in Community:

- i. The context of discipleship in Jesus’ day was in community. Jewish society was structured into large family units connected to neighbors. They worshipped in the same synagogues, played and ate together, and learned together.
- ii. There were 4 main Jewish leadership groups in Jesus’ era – 1) Pharisees, 2) Sadducees, 3) Zealots, and 4) Essenes. Each had a separate world view and ministry and political identity – The Pharisees were the teachers and leaders of the Synagogue. The Sadducees were the leaders of the Temple worship being the priests and scribes. The Zealots were those eager to overthrow the Roman overlords and restore the self-rule of the Jewish Monarchy. The Essenes were a separatist group that was devoted to study of the Scripture and prayer. This was likely a precursor to the monastic movement that developed in the early church era.

d. Historical context:

- i. The presence of an integrated Roman political world had great impact on the radiation of the church during the first century AD.
- ii. It would appear that Paul’s journeys were allowed by the Romans, and this encouraged the migration of the new faith with only occasional local resistance – such as Ephesus.
- iii. Obviously the relative security of the Pax-Romana allowed the migration to speedily move along. Also the integrated travel routes of sea-farers and roads spread ideas and mail quickly and easily. Hence the cultural timing for the arrival of the Messiah was perfect for God’s redemption plan.

- 4. As a result... what should discipleship look like today? What is wrong or lacking in Church discipleship programs & models? What would we recommend to do differently? What is the simplest most important change would we should make to grow authentic disciples?**

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- a. Most churches rely almost exclusively on individual and/or small group Bible study:
 - i. These are individual, one on one, and one on four approaches. While these form relational intimacy, participants are exposed to a very limited view of Christian discipleship.
 - ii. Instead, there ought to be a greater emphasis on medium sized groups – such as home fellowships or home churches where 8-12 or even 24 people get together for meals, prayer, study, reflection, and mutual love & support.
 - iii. Medium groups are most similar to the community faith groups and Jesus discipleship model.
 - iv. Of these medium groups typically there would be an interior structure of core leaders, teachers, planners, etc. that would contribute to a community world view.
- b. The two biggest aspects that foment personal growth are community interaction and relational dialog.
 - i. Community provides the secure situation where support and nurture can occur. Identity within a community is a powerful bonding agent, much more personal and enduring than what can be developed within a larger church organization where personal identification is more difficult.
 - ii. Dialogue has to do with reflecting about our thoughts based on our study and sharing these thoughts with others. Emphasis is on engaging others in thinking, not convincing them of what is “right or wrong.” Debate is interaction intended to prove one “right and another wrong” while dialogue is a “sharing and exploration of thought and ideas.”
 - iii. Evangelism is not about “winning the Lost” but rather about “engaging the confused” where ideas can open minds and allow God to transform hearts. Mental conviction is not as important as heart transformation. Do we think our way into a new manner of living? Or do we live our way into a new manner of thinking? Or is it a healthy combination of both? I believe it is the combination that is most helpful.
- c. What discipleship model is most effective for my ministry needs?
 - i. Personal – I have my own quiet time and reflection – it is a combination of scripture reading, devotional reading, prayerful thought, and meditation.
 - ii. Small Group – I have been involved in a TheOdyssey Spiritual Formation group – which is a same sex Spiritual Transformation group of 4-5 men.
 - iii. Medium Group – I have a home fellowship that has met consistently every other week for the past 9 years. We have a stable number of people – 6 married couples who are involved in doing life together. When asked of my ‘church identity’ it is within the context of this group.
 - iv. Larger Group – In my Teaching Ministry we employ group teaching and small group dialog and small group study. The large group is 25 or more, the medium group is 12, and the small group 4-5. In this approach we

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initially meet as a large group for teaching and body life, and then break down into the small groups. It involves worship, contemplation, fellowship, and study in a coffee house sort of locale.

- d. What forum and context is the most successful in producing disciples? It is a combination of approaches:
- i. Medium Community group identity – is best in establishing and promoting long-term health and group identity.
 1. Joint study, worship, and reflection binds us together in the Spirit of Christ.
 2. This is the best for body life and heart development.
 - ii. Small group is best for personal growth.
 3. Grappling with scripture where one mind sharpens the other is more easily accomplished in a small group.
 4. Small groups tend to be best for getting all involved in the Word especially of younger believers relating to older believers.
 - iii. One on One is particularly helpful for coaching and mentoring.
 - iv. Problem is that both the Heart and the Mind need to be strengthened together and in balance. If one is stronger than the other, we venture into either legalism or the abuse of our freedom in Christ. Balanced, heart and mind produce fruit:
 5. Character change
 6. Lifestyle change
 7. Works of outreach and mercy
5. The paradox of the modern church:
- a. Most church organizations pretty uniformly display:
 - i. Numerical growth but no real qualitative depth
 - ii. Form but no substance
 - iii. Knowledge but no love
 - iv. Conviction but no commitment
 - b. The church has unfortunately become more concerned with “how much” rather than “how real.”
 - i. Life learning is not primarily accomplished in a classroom setting, and is dependent on developing lasting relationships. Time spent together is seen to be a determining factor. The disciple continues learning as the “discipler” is given increasing opportunity to practice the truth in ministry situations. Disciples are living out the Scriptures in the daily and mundane contexts of family, work, church, etc. The imitation of a personal model requires a long-term relationship.
 - ii. Disciplers should not see their role solely as spiritual gurus, but also as fellow life-learners who follow the Master. This requires transparency, vulnerability and availability. Disciples must also put the words of God into practice and not simply be depositories of mere biblical knowledge. The discipler’s task is not complete when a disciple can recite doctrine.

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- iii. Disciples live out the vision of the greater Church identity as a visible community of salt and light, a counterculture making known to its surrounding culture the values of God's kingdom. The community of believers who love one another bear witness to the world that they are Jesus' disciples. There must be a corporate life that responds with common voice and action.

6. Ministry Discussion Summary – though we discussed the issues together as a study group, it was our hope to make this presentation more about the discipling models ascribed to our specific ministry situations. We have 6 models we are presently using in our ministries.

What problems do we face in modern discipleship and what should discipleship look like today? As ministry leaders and knowing that we have all read the same materials and have learned much in our class about these things, we decided to list some of the components that best resonated with us.

a. Reflections on Wilkins -

- i. His Definition of discipleship – A proper definition is important because it helps focus the goal of our ministry efforts. Wilkins definition is a great starting place - *“Discipleship and discipling mean living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing into conformity to His image.”*
- ii. Discipleship expectations:
 - 1. Counting the cost – which includes self-denial, taking up the cross, and following Jesus [Lk 14:27]
 - 2. Wilkins states that this not only characterizes entrance into “The Way” but also characterizes life on “The Way.” Discipleship expectations need to be reviewed and restated often to keep us centered living for the future in the here and now.
- iii. Making a decision to follow Jesus is an all or nothing proposition: There is no half way or good enough position with Jesus; it is His Way on His terms. Wilkins provides three notable quotes:
 - 1. “If Jesus truly was who he said he was, and He came to earth to show people the way of life – then it is either true or not true.”
 - 2. “If He was truly God, then I am a fool for not listening to him about the meaning of life, about how I should direct my life's energies, and about living out the day-to-day activities of my life.”
 - 3. “If he was not God, then I am a fool to pretend religiously that he was.”
- iv. Following Jesus means committing one's life to the Master and His Way. As we do so:
 - 1. His Spirit provides the courage, strength, and the endurance necessary to make it to the end of the Way.
 - 2. Christian discipleship is living always with the end in sight.

b. Reflections on Bonhoeffer:

- i. **Cheap Grace** – “Is the deadly enemy of our church. True discipleship is a fight today for costly grace.”
- ii. **Costly Grace** – “necessitates real contrition, genuine submission, and absolute obedience.
- iii. **Exclusive attachment** – “When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to His person. The Grace of His call bursts all bonds of legalism.” The law can no longer hold me.
- iv. **Dependent discipleship** – “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship. Discipleship without a passionate commitment to Jesus is a way of our own choosing.”

c. Reflections on Barna – *“Christianity would be incredibly influential in our culture if Christians consistently lived their faith. Most non-Christians don’t read the Bible, so they judge Christianity by the lives of the Christians they see. The problem is that millions of Christians don’t live like Christians – that’s partially because they don’t know what they believe and therefore cannot apply appropriate scriptural values to their lives.”*

- i. **Discipleship is causing people to think and act as Christians** – that is for them to develop “Christ likeness” – we should focus on discipling methods that encourage and reinforce:
- ii. **Christian Character development**
 1. Transformation – I need a new nature – Matthew 5-7 is the standard that inaugurates Kingdom Character principles. What is impossible for man is possible for God.
 2. Dependency on Jesus – Sunday attendance and “Chameleon Christianity” don’t cut it – what I am when no one is watching is the standard we should live to.
- iii. **Proper thinking and decision making**
 1. Discipline - a well-trained and disciplined mind allows disciples to stand firm against cultural/societal pressures.
 2. Uniformity - disciples need to see their faith worked out in their day-to-day activities of living, and they need to be trained to make life choices based on Kingdom principles.
- iv. **Building affirming relationships**
 1. Community - discipleship occurs only in community; hence building healthy relationships is a key component. The art of relational intimacy is being lost in our society where Internet communications have replaced face-to-face interaction. We need to deliberately build relational bridges in the church.
 2. Individuality – personal time with God in prayer, praise and study is important, but there is no such thing as a “Lone Ranger” Christian.

3. Outreach - Social justice is relational intimacy in our socio/cultural community; it is impossible to be a Christian and not to care for the individual needs of others.

To the end of achieving Christ likeness, Barna believes we need to:

- v. **Create a personal plan** based on each disciple's individual inventory – Jesus meets each person where they are and then takes them somewhere else.

Leadership needs to realize and plan for the fact that:

1. Each person has **"distinctive needs"** – programmatic approaches fail to deal with differing needs.
2. Each person grows at a **"different speeds"** – programmatic approaches fail to deal with differing paces.
3. Each person has **"distinctive abilities"** – in the words of an old Paul Simon song, "One man's ceiling is another's floor." Everyone will not be a superstar, we can only expect them to become the best they are capable of – thus we need to know them so we don't put them into places or situations they can't handle or succeed in.
4. Each person has **"distinctive callings"** – they have a specific place within the organic body of believers. All disciples are ministers.

- d. **Reflections on Ogden – Statement of the Problem:**

"If we are to devise a successful strategy of disciple making we must first assess the gap between where we are and where we are called to go"

This is the ministry version of "counting the cost." The first responsibility of a leader is to define Christian reality. To this end, Ogden offers –

- i. **"7 Elements of Discipling Reality"** Christian Leaders need to address:
 1. What passes for most discipleship is **"superficial rather than transformational"** – we need to set the expectation for transformational living.
 2. The church desperately needs **"proactive ministers"** who call the body onto higher spiritual ground – church leaders need to have a loftier vision of discipleship and of their work in the church.
 3. The **"Pervasive nature of Discipleship"** affects every aspect of your life – compartmentalization is absurd.
 4. Christians ARE a **"countercultural force"** – we need to know that and we need to live like it.
 5. The church IS the **"present incarnation of Jesus"** on earth. The Spirit of Christ indwells each disciple and when the church is "Being the church" they are active as "salt and light" in their surroundings.
 6. Disciples are expected to be **"biblically informed"** – the priority of a scriptural emphasis and basic study training to produce self-feeding disciples.

7. Outreach and social justice - disciples actively share their faith and engage the prevailing culture on Christ's own terms. We don't need to make excuses for our faith, or to be so politically and socially correct that we remove the punch in Jesus teachings. We just need to accurately speak His words of truth in love and let the Holy Spirit work in convicting and transforming.
 - ii. "Jesus' Discipling emphasis" – "Jesus employed an empowerment model of servant leadership and training. Whereas pastors and ministry leaders today tend to be satisfied in having people become dependent upon their teaching and care, Jesus wanted self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers."
 - iii. "Paul's Discipling Emphasis" – Christian Identity is transformational – it is about being "in Christ" and forming "Christ in you." Paul's goal was progressive growth from infancy, through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood.
- e. The bottom line of these reflections is the realization that - Discipleship is always personal and it is relational. The heart of a disciple leads them to seek after Jesus as their Good Shepherd.
7. Applying these reflection components on developing a "Discipling Ministry Statement"
 - a. *Disciples are committed to the Person of Jesus, they are intent on Being the Church and Doing God's will; they are A Christian Community where they are Actively Engaged in Worshipping and Serving our Awesome God.*
 - b. The Solution: Christian Leaders need to realign their ministry – believing alone isn't adequate; we need to be "living into" a discipling community. This is a Transformational living process that includes:
 - i. A Shared Identity – Our identity initiates and sustains our spiritual traction: if our focus is properly upon God we are a counter-cultural influence where the fragrance of Christ can penetrate the world, and God sees us as the child He loves dearly. A shared identity has 2 components – corporate and individual:
 - i. Corporately, we live as a dependent community – we recognize that we are dependent upon God who called and has freed us. We can do nothing on our own, desperately needing the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and other faithful believers to encourage and redirect us. Thus we purposefully engage in active fellowship as a multi-generational enclave who in love and obedience are:
 1. Submitted to God
 2. Submitted to the Church leadership

3. Committed to one another
 - ii. Individually, we live as committed Disciples – we recognize that we are individuals being progressively transformed into the Character and Likeness of Jesus through the intentional transformation of both mind and heart. [Rom 12:2]
 1. We are Saints who sometimes sin – God sees me hidden in Christ as the Son He loves, not the sinner I was.
 2. We are being conformed – through active participation with the Holy Spirit. [Rom 8:29]
 3. The mind and heart are being transformed – the mind is the cognitive process, while the heart is the emotive process – both balanced and in harmony.
 - ii. A Shared Purpose – God has called us to know Him and enjoy Him forever – He has given humanity a purpose and a means for living out our lives in light of His calling:
 1. Devotion to worshiping God – in a manner that brings Him praise, adulation and glory.
 2. Devotion to the study of the Word – where our minds are being conformed – both strengthening and building the body of believers
 3. Devotion to prayer – where our hearts are transformed into the likeness of Jesus
 - iii. A Shared Mission – in our congregation, community, and globally – Jesus thought that this was important, so should we:
 1. Service – social justice, benevolence, mercy
 2. Evangelism – to proclaim the gospel to the lost
 3. Discipling – Transformational growth where we are making reproducing disciples, not merely thinkers who participate.
 - iv. A Shared Future – we need to refocus our thinking with the end in mind. It is not about enduring a process; it is savoring a relationship in light of a promised future:
 1. Jesus is with us now and He will Personally return to claim us.
 2. We need to long for His return and live expectantly for it.
 3. Although the world around us seems concrete and enduring, it is by its nature transient – it will all pass away. The only permanent reality is spiritual – which we cannot see, but can experience now.
 4. Thus, heaven is the Ultimate Reality, and our present life on earth is the ultimate un-reality show.

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- c. **Conclusion:** we need a Fundamental Redefinition of Discipleship and a loftier vision of the calling to make disciples.

A working definition of discipleship – with the hope of igniting a more pervasive discipling passion in our churches. This helps refine the proper goal of discipling:

“An individual being progressively transformed into the character and likeness of Jesus. This transformation is a process that involves both mind and heart, and results in the crucifixion of the sin nature, the deliberate submersion of the self in Christ, and living evidence of spiritual fruit [Gal 5:19-23]. Disciples are self-initiating, reproducing, and fully committed followers of Jesus Christ who live life in community where expectations, responsibilities, and hope are defined and experienced.”