

Discipleship 101: The Master's Model in Modern Day



By Megan Anderson

Discipleship is a term, like *sanctification* or *reformation*, casually tossed about in religious circles, is usually unaccompanied by a clear definition. We have heard the word enough times to cultivate a vague understanding of what it means, but don't afford it due consideration. Now more than ever, we are experiencing the consequences of that failure. Why disregard discipleship and yet cling to other biblical imperatives, such as tithing and communal worship? My guess is that it is because discipleship costs us more on more levels than any other church practice. Discipleship is intensive, intimate and intimidating, but once it is embraced, it proves invaluable to our personal spiritual health and the expansion of our collective faith.

At its core, discipleship is the intersection of three elements: relationship, transformation and multiplication. In one form of discipleship relationship, an experienced believer may interact on a regular basis with a developing Christian, encouraging him/her to emulate Christ's character, promoting growth of understanding and application of God's word, and fostering the fulfillment of Jesus' great commission to "go and make disciples of all nations..." (*Matthew 28:19-20*, NIV). Discipleship is fundamentally a partnership with the purpose of opening every area of life to the Holy Spirit's influence.

No one-size-fits-all approach applies to discipleship. Though there are essential elements to this ministry, each relationship is as unique as the individuals comprising it. All those who have led me in discipleship, used distinct gifts and personalities to do so in unique ways. One took an academic approach

while another made biblical principles tangible through creative hands-on crafts and projects. I profited from each leader differently: I personally practiced discipleship and benefited from two women with each of whom I enjoy a dissimilar, yet profound relationship, despite my leading them both in the same style. We process Jesus' teaching at our own pace and discuss it in our own terms. The nature of discipleship provides the freedom to meet individual needs and incorporate the interests of those involved. It isn't limited by age, education, race or experience. Ultimately, it is about establishing a trusting relationship out of which we grow together toward Christ.

Pursuing Christ's character, including his love for the Church and passion for reconciling the lost to himself, requires time dedicated to his word. Jesus tells us in *John 8:31-32*, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (ESV). Discipleship takes Bible study to the next level by demonstrating how to abide in or continually apply biblical teaching in everyday circumstances. We not only delve into the meaning of God's words on the page, but devise in practical terms how we will live that truth out together, and then we hold one another accountable. Tapping into the Bible's power to teach, rebuke, correct and train in righteousness, we transform into competent servants of God equipped for every good work (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*). Discipleship provides an ideal platform for asking tough questions and wrestling with difficult concepts. This is how we grow both in understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit's ability to reform our likeness into that of



Jesus (*2 Corinthians 3:18*). The more we resemble Christ and develop his compassion for those who don't know him, the more effective in multiplying our faith we become.

The biblical command to make disciples falls on every person who confesses Christ their Savior. Every Christian's responsibility includes multiplying the faith via investing in others through one mode or another. Discipleship is by far the most personal and, arguably, most effective method of accomplishing the Great Commission. Jesus chose only 12 individuals in whom to invest his life. Those few men then, likewise, invested in others and their numbers more than quintupled to reach 70 in a short span of time (*Luke 10:17*). According to the Pew Research Center, there are an estimated 2.18 billion Christians in the world today. How did so many generations of Christ-followers descend from a handful of ordinary work-a-day men? Jesus and Paul set the example of choosing carefully with whom to enter into such a relationship. Jesus specifically called his 12 disciples, knowing they would be reliable in carrying his teaching into the world after he was gone, and Paul followed suit in selecting Timothy and Titus to perpetuate the gospel's reach (*2 Timothy 2:2; John 1:35-50, 1 Timothy 1:18, Titus 1:4-5*). We, too, need to prayerfully choose partners for discipleship, partners who will prove trustworthy and faithful to what we share, partners currently striving to apply God's word in their circumstances and willing to one day pass that training on to others.

But discipleship comes at too high a cost for many individuals. It requires time commitment, holds us accountable, nudges us outside our comfort zones, challenges how our faith is lived out and confronts us with potentially difficult questions and truths about God, ourselves and our beliefs. It is a model meant for change, and finding both teachers and students willing to bear the cross of discipleship presents a challenge (*Luke 14:27*). For both discipler and disciple, it is a practice in giving, under God's authority, of one's self to the other. Honestly, there were days I dreaded meeting with my discipler because I knew she would challenge me to evangelize in ways that made me uncomfortable. But after I

humbled myself to her authority and did what she asked, I stepped away with a deeper compassion for people who do not know God and with a renewed thankfulness for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Unfortunately, discipleship is no longer a central practice in many Friends meetings. Our failure to engage in discipleship has led to stunted believers and an exodus from the church of other generations. It has caused generational divides, shallow relationships and inadequate guidance in navigating the messiness of modern culture as a Christ-follower. Rising believers tire of pat answers fed them from behind sterilized pulpits and through cookie-cutter lesson plans. They crave something more applicable and specific to the struggles of their peer groups than what they have drawn from corporate Sunday service. The intimacy of discipleship, however, resolves many of these issues. It is up to us within our meetings to offer discipleship proactively.

Congregations that foster a culture of discipleship stand to benefit as much as the individual disciplers and disciples. Watching younger believers grow in spiritual maturity encourages those more advanced in their faith and challenges them, as well, to continue growing. Generation gaps are bridged, as disciplers and their disciples learn to communicate and express compassion toward one another. As disciples train to recognize and serve with their spiritual gifts, the meeting's supply of leaders is also refreshed, making the larger Body of Christ more effective in fulfilling the Great Commission. Encouraging mature believers to invite younger believers out for coffee, facilitating intergenerational small groups and making six months of discipleship part of the process of obtaining church membership are simple ways to integrate discipleship more predominantly into the fabric of church culture. Making discipleship a priority within our meetings is vital to our spiritual maturity and our unity as a body to carry out God's will.

If we call ourselves Christians, a people striving to follow Jesus' example in all we do, why would we exclude one of the most definitive aspects of his life and ministry? We find ourselves at a crucial point in history in which upcoming generations with greater access to the nations than ever before are questioning whether church is the best place to grow spiritually and experience community. If they fail to encounter believers who thirst for deep, authentic relationships and practical guidance for pursuing righteousness in daily life, they will seek those things elsewhere, leaving the Church stagnant and ineffectual. Our choice whether or not to take discipleship seriously impacts eternity. Yes, discipleship comes at a price. Jesus is clear about that. But can we afford not to pay up our time, experience and misgivings when we stand to gain so much in exchange?

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