



FELLOWS FEATURE

Discipleship:

It Starts with You

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Last summer the president of the C.S. Lewis Institute, Kerry Knott, outlined the vision for the “Decade of Discipleship.”¹ It could not have been timelier. It’s no secret that the church is suffering; whether it’s called moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD), casual Christianity, easy-believism, or nominalism, “the lives of most professing Christians are not much different from their nonbelieving neighbors.”² Instead of adopting a biblical worldview, Christians tend to share the same basic presuppositions as nonbelievers and embrace ideas and values “that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe.”³ This has contributed to a significant degradation of discipleship. But this is not news. This has been described in four previous editions of *Knowing & Doing*, so I will not rehash this but use it as a point of departure to address people like me: the laymen and laywomen of the church. And I’ll use my own journey as a backdrop to illustrate how we can frame this critical issue.

My Personal Journey

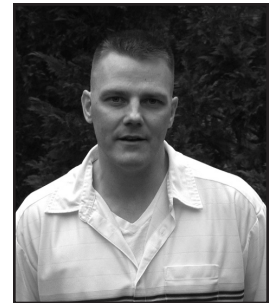
Although I was raised in the church I never grasped the importance of discipleship. When I finally heeded the call of the Spirit, I embarked on a journey of intense independent study and learning. I read every book I could find, sought out the best minds, and added much-needed intellectual rigor to a faith that was never much more than a feeling or general disposition. But as I studied the “big questions,” I realized something was missing. The Spirit made it clear that I had to act on what I had learned. I had to balance knowing with doing. And to do so I needed a guide, a mentor. As I evaluated my spiritual journey and mentally charted its trajectory, I realized that when I had been more

faithful there had been strong, prominent Christians in my life. Some were mentors; others were peers. When I had strayed, there had been a conspicuous absence of any such presence.

I began my first foray into discipleship when God placed a strong brother in my life, and I grew through his encouragement and fellowship. When we began a Bible study and he learned that I’d never led one, his encouragement and advice nudged me more toward the doing. As we regularly spent time together, I realized that I wanted a faith like his. He had a strong mind, but that was not the sum of his faith. His was a practical faith, one that translated directly into everyday life.

At my next duty station I intentionally sought others with whom I could build similar relationships, and God led me to the Tun Tavern Fellowship. (The name is taken from the historical birthplace of the Marine Corps.) In this band of brothers, I found passionate, bright, and committed Marines and a place where I could teach, encourage, and challenge and be taught, encouraged, and challenged, a place where discipleship was the very *raison d’être*. It was in their DNA. I encountered one particularly astute brother who challenged and encouraged me by continually pulling me up to his level. He wasn’t impressed with my learning but was interested in how I was applying it. I was used to being coddled and praised for my “spiritual initiative.” This was the first time I’d really been challenged and had someone push back on me. And it was good!

Before long the Spirit led me to the C.S. Lewis Institute (CSLI). While attending CSLI lectures, I fell un-



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der the watchful eye of the man who would become my mentor. He invited me to take part in the Fellows Program, where I discovered the joy and rewards of discipleship of the heart and mind by drawing closer to God. I was stretched spiritually and learned in new ways. The knowledge offered ran deeper than doctrine and theology. It was more than intellectual knowledge. It was understanding. One aspect of the program that I had dismissed as an inconvenience—the triads—became one of the more enriching experiences, and through it I experienced what Greg Ogden calls the “hothouse of Christian growth.”⁴ Further, my mentor encouraged me to press beyond the Fellows curriculum and read the likes of J. Oswald Sanders, Greg Ogden, and Michael Wilkins. It became clear: discipleship is my calling. It’s our calling.

Further, I was disabused of the notion that “discipleship is for an elite, more committed, or more specifically trained person or group of Christians.”⁵ The reality is that “discipleship is not just one aspect of the church’s mission, but it encompasses all that the church does.”⁶ Why did this take me almost forty years to learn? Why didn’t anyone tell me this? How about you? Do your small groups sometimes feel like the blind leading the blind? Does your involvement in church seem fractured or disjointed? Do you feel, as a friend said to me, adrift despite your efforts to the contrary? Do the various ministries and activities in your church seem like a loose conglomeration of efforts that are hardly related? I contend that most churches have not grasped this simple yet profound reality.

What really grabbed my attention were two questions posed by Ogden at a CSLI lecture. First he asked, “How many consider themselves Christians?” Every hand went up. Then he probed further: “How many of you consider yourselves disciples?” Two-thirds of the hands went down. Is there a difference? How can you be a Christian without being a disciple? Matthew 28:19 is clear: “Go therefore and make disciples,” not, “Go evangelize,” or, “Go make Christians.” In fact, I was stunned to learn that Christ’s followers are called Christians only three times in the New Testament.⁷ It’s fairly well known that we were first called Christians in Antioch, but it is less well known that it was derogatory. As followers of Christ are prone to do, we’ve borne insult as a badge of honor. Despite this turn of the phrase, I echo the sentiments of the late John Stott: “One wishes in some ways that the word disciple had continued into the following centuries, so that Christians were self-consciously disciples of Jesus, and took seriously their responsibility to be ‘under discipline.’”⁸ As a friend once said, the term *disciple* has more bite to

it and just seems to carry more weight. It’s hard to be a *nominal disciple*.

Investing in Lives, a Few at a Time

So that’s my story and concern for the church. I won’t belabor anything; you get it. We are all disciples, and the myth that there are levels or classes of Christians must be exploded. Discipleship is the umbrella under which everything else resides. Evangelism, apologetics, missions, etc., are essential elements of discipleship. I trust you’ve read *Knowing & Doing* and don’t need me to reiterate this. You want what Marines call the “so what?” So I’ll get to the point. If you’re like me, you have not attended seminary but are an earnest follower of Christ who strives to be a good disciple. You’re involved in your church and are probably even a leader. You are not a nominal Christian and have not bought into MTD. You’re exasperated because you feel like you’re the only one who seems to get it. But I want to challenge *you to take the initiative in your church or parish*.

As a Marine, I move often and have attended ten churches in the past nineteen years. I can verify that “A great deal of focus has been put on ‘getting people to the door of the church,’ but not enough done to help them grow to spiritual maturity once they are in.”⁹ Most churches are busy dealing with the symptoms of this discipleship deficit but fail to treat the malady.¹⁰ And many pastors are consumed by programs. But I also have seen discipleship thrive. One example is the Tun Tavern Fellowship where there is no formal structure by which this loose network gathers. It is simply Marines engaging in discipleship through one-on-one mentoring relationships, triads/quads, and small groups.¹¹

I’ve been encouraged to see them fulfill the Great Commission without relying on a brick and mortar institution. It’s a portable (or, as we say in the Corps, *expeditionary*) ministry that travels with you. They’ve fostered an environment and created a context in which they disciple one another intentionally; I’ve seen Marines disciple one another from different countries. (Personal interaction is preferred, but we do everything possible to maintain relationships.) This happens with great ease and does not require tremendous effort. And if a small group of Marines scattered across the globe can do it, so can the local church. In fact, some do.

Using the CSLI Fellows Program as a model, several churches in northern Virginia have created Fellows Programs of their own. But we don’t need to be that ambitious. That might be too much for some churches. We need to understand that our mission is

to make disciples; we don't need to convene an elders' meeting or initiate church reform to do so. If we invest in the lives of a few at a time, we'll start something that will grow. We don't need to be a part of a program to disciple one another. We simply need a vision.

Another good example is a church in California where the men's pastor decided to forgo the typical model of flashy events and large venues as the center of gravity for his ministry. Those events still have their place, but he's focused his energy into discipleship. Seeing the need for men to get real with God and one another, he created "Guerilla Groups" consisting of three to four men committed to gathering regularly, preferably weekly, to disciple one another. This has led to tremendous growth. And by growth I do not mean in quantity; that is not the metric that indicates real success. Any new program can draw a crowd and give the appearance of growth. Growth should be measured in strength, and the strength of the men's program has noticeably increased.¹² In fact, the pastor has worked himself out of a job in several instances.

For example, he organized a missions trip to Central America in which the biggest ministry was in the lives of the men who went. They returned transformed and renewed and have assumed the planning responsibilities for the next trip. In another instance, he started a weekly outdoor gathering at the church where men cook, fellowship, and share testimonies. He now hardly needs to attend, because it is run completely by laymen. A third instance is when he suggested that the church partner with the local municipality to organize a crisis response network. Again, the men are rising up to become helping hands within the community. By articulating his vision to others and focusing on discipleship, he has seen the men in this ministry grow in their faith. At last count, there were more than twelve Guerilla Groups. Any church and any ministry could do the same.

So what's involved in this vision? Patience, for one thing. Disciples are not mass-produced.¹³ In today's high-tempo world, we like everything fast, but it's not enough to hold a discipleship conference. As useful as this is for training and education, it will not bring about transformation. We must recognize what Ogden describes so well in *Transforming Discipleship*: the most effective way to make disciples is a few at a time over time—life-on-life engagement in which we pour ourselves into the lives of others the way our Lord did with the Twelve.

We do not need all the answers. We do not need to corner the market on spiritual maturity. We simply need a vision to share our lives with others and commit to seeing them grow and to grow with them. This can be done in simple, everyday life. In fact, it's essential that it be done in everyday life.¹⁴ This vision must reject shortcuts and focus on commitments; it must avoid expediency and insist on relationships.¹⁵ In short, it must focus on helping others conform to the image of Christ via small, quality, long-term relationships. And it must reproduce. Similar to how I learned to balance knowing with doing, we must encourage those we disciple to do likewise. The vision must not culminate in a "holy huddle." We must move into new relationships and help others discover what it means to follow Christ, and one of our goals must be to make disciples who will disciple. That's what disciples do. If we don't, we're not.

It helps to view discipleship as a continuum. Instead of falling lockstep into a single method, it's best to view discipleship as a spectrum along which any gospel-related activity can fall. It's worth quoting Wilkins again: "discipleship is not just one aspect of the church's mission, but it encompasses all that the church does."¹⁶ If we view the church's activities through the lens of discipleship, everything will have a unifying purpose. This does not diminish the roles of other aspects of the gospel but enhances them. Because discipleship is a pretext for all gospel activity, it puts them in perspective and also gives them context. David Platt says it best: "Disciple making is not about a program or an event but about a relationship. As we share the gospel, we impart life, and this is the essence of making disciples. Sharing the life of Christ."¹⁷ Interpreting our lives through discipleship brings us into harmony with the Great Commission and provides cohesion to our efforts. All means work toward a single end, for the gospel and for the glory of God.

And on the practical level, viewing discipleship as a continuum helps us visualize how our efforts fit into the big picture. We might see how in some situations one-on-one mentoring may not be a good fit and why a triad might be a better option, or how a small group of committed, passionate Christian disciples can lead to other ministry opportunities. The keys are flexibility and adaptability. Anyone who's seen the film *Heartbreak Ridge* knows that Marines improvise, adapt, and overcome. We specialize in regimen, discipline, and order. But contrary to the stereotype, we are neither rigid nor inflexible. We are one of the most flexible organizations on the planet. We are put into chaotic situations where those disciplines provide a point of departure

from which we operate. Our actions informed by training and discipline are situation-dependent and vary, but the principles upon which they are based are fixed. This serves as a great illustration for our vision of discipleship. While the means by which we disciple may differ, the principles do not. We are to love God and love others, and the situation will drive the method of discipleship.

Regardless of the shape of our vision, it's useless unless it starts with you and me. The Great Commission is not an abstract doctrine to be relegated to theologians or left for missionaries. It's *our* mission and we must act. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, "The life of discipleship is . . . obedience to the Son of God," and, "It is now only a question of yes or no, of obedience or disobedience."¹⁸ If we choose the life of discipleship, "We must get into action and obey."¹⁹ So let's join CSLI in the Decade of Discipleship by casting our own vision. We cannot wait for it to come from the pulpit or for a church committee to implement a formal discipleship program. We should encourage this but not wait for it.

I challenge you to look at the spheres in which you live, work and play and consider the opportunities before you. For some, the workplace is a harvest waiting to be reaped. For others it may be your neighborhood. For all of us, the church is a great place to start. Let's reclaim our churches from MTD and reverse the trend of nominalism. Let's stop blaming the ills of the church on the world and pinning our hopes on politics. Let's stop blaming the pastorate by examining ourselves and realizing that it starts with us. If we will invest in the lives of a few at a time with the intent to reproduce and multiply, we will make ripples that will extend beyond our line of sight. And if we share this vision and encourage others to do the same, we'll create a community of committed, thriving Christian disciples fulfilling the Great Commission. Let's teach our youth and watch it transform them. Let's encourage an older generation to mentor a younger one. Let's teach it in our small groups and form triads of our own. Let's seek people in whom we can invest our lives and disciple through the ministries in which God has placed us. Let discipleship unite us in the building up of the body of Christ in the knowledge of God, and let us respond as the Twelve did to our Lord: with obedience.²⁰

Notes

1. Kerry Knott, "Sparking a Discipleship Movement", C.S. Lewis Institute, <http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/blog/2011/06/sparking-a-discipleship-movement/> (June 1, 2011).

2. Thomas A. Tarrants, "The Transforming Impact of True Discipleship," *Knowing & Doing* (Spring 2011), 1.

3. David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 3.

4. Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 153.

5. Michael J. Wilkins, "Discipleship for Changing Times and Ministries," *Knowing & Doing* (Spring 2011), 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 30.

7. John Stott, *The Radical Disciple* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 13.

8. *Ibid.*, 14.

9. Knott, "Sparking a Discipleship Movement".

10. For a thorough treatment of this deficit, I highly encourage you to read Greg Ogden, "The Discipleship Deficit: Where Have All the Disciples Gone?," *Knowing & Doing* (Spring 2011), 6–7, 24–28.

11. For a detailed explanation of triads and quads and the advantages/disadvantages of small groups, teaching, preaching, and discipling see Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, particularly chapter 8.

12. Platt, *Radical*, 50: "We can so easily deceive ourselves, mistaking the presence of physical bodies in a crowd for the existence of spiritual life in a community."

13. Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 49: "Sadly, too often in Christianity we have taken a cookie-cutter approach to Christian discipleship."

14. Wilkins, *In His Image*, 52. See also Thomas A. Tarrants, "The Grace of God," CS Lewis Institute lecture, 2007: "[You must] live this out exactly where God has you. We don't need more people going to seminary. In fact, you could argue the case that we've had too much of that. Seminaries have killed off the churches in many places. What we need [are] people just like us living out the Gospel in the midst of the people God has surrounded us with who don't know the Lord." It can be found at www.cslewisinstitute.org/node/332.

15. Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 134.

16. Wilkins, "Discipleship for Changing Times and Ministries," 30.

17. Platt, *Radical*, 96.

18. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (1959; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1995), 76, 78.

19. *Ibid.*, 78. See also 61: "But then discipleship can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him."

20. *Ibid.*, 57; see also Ephesians 4 and Mark 2.

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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