



Discipleship for Changing Times and Ministries

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This article originally appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

As I stand on a bluff overlooking the blue Pacific Ocean near our home in Southern California, I watch lines of waves forming far out on the horizon. The waves that finally break near shore are much larger today than normal.

I check out the surf report and find that these waves were generated by a monstrous storm. The weather is sunny and calm where I stand, but the waves that break below me were generated by a ferocious hurricane-force storm many days ago and thousands of miles away off of the tip of New Zealand.

If I am to surf these waves effectively, I need to know as much as possible about their size, power, direction, and speed.

Waves upon the Ocean and the Church

Similarly as we stand here in the second decade of the twenty-first century, waves of various kinds of practices, fads, and styles continue to sweep upon the church. And like the waves of the ocean, the waves of church issues that impact us today are normally generated by forces far away and long ago. And if we are to ride them effectively, we need to know as much as possible about the forces that have brought them about and how they impact us today.

Following World War II, the parachurch movement spawned organizations such as the Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association that revolutionized campus and evangelistic mission. During the 1960s and '70s, the Jesus movement transfigured traditional ways of expressing worship. The 1980s and '90s saw the arrival of the seeker movement with megachurch-

es that reached out to people that had never darkened the door of conventional churches. Most recently in the 1990s and the first decade of this century we have witnessed the spiritual formation movement that has transcended ecclesial lines to impact mainline, charismatic, Bible, and emergent churches with the quest for meaningful spirituality.

All of these movements generated power that impacts the church today. We find this also in waves of different forms of "discipleship" and "disciple making" that break upon the church. Discipleship is not a recent or unique phenomenon. It was initiated nearly two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ entered human history and called out to men and women, "Follow me."

But discipleship as we know it in the church today is influenced by other forces, near and far. The terms discipleship and disciple making are related expressions, referring respectively to the process of growing as a disciple of Jesus and the process of helping others to grow as Jesus' disciple. Each of us carries around various conceptions of *discipleship* and *disciple making* that are influenced by our past experiences.

Discipleship Traditions

The waves of discipleship materials that have swept over the church in the past sixty years have in many cases caused people to be more confused than ever when they think of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. These traditions developed out of a desire



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to be more like the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament, yet they often became so rigorously focused on their particular practices that only an elite few could adhere to them.

The Learner. Some emphasize that a disciple is the person who is dedicated to an intense study of the Bible. A disciple is actively involved in personal devotional time, Bible memorization, and Bible study as a regular habit of life. This implies that a Christian becomes a disciple when she is dedicated to learning the Word of God and applying it.

The Committed. Others emphasize that a disciple is supremely committed to Christ. He has rejected a worldly lifestyle. This means that a Christian is a disciple when he has truly denied himself, taken up his cross, and is actively following Jesus on an everyday basis.

The Worker. Still others declare that a disciple is actively involved in Christian service. Her service distinguishes her from nominal Christians who simply attend the group or church. This implies that a Christian becomes a disciple when she is an active worker for Christ.

The Mentor. Some of us have been involved in one-on-one relationships in which an older, more mature Christian has “discipled” us. This is often called “mentoring.” Many people believe that only when we are involved in such a relationship can we say that we have experienced true discipleship.

The Small Group. Small groups are one of the most effective means of facilitating growth in Christians, because we can learn from the example of others, we can open our lives up to others, and we can be held accountable to the growth that we say we desire. Many suggest that in the same way that Jesus “discipled” his small band of followers, true discipleship occurs today when a person is involved in a small group.

A Definition of Discipleship

There is, of course, truth in each of these, because each encourages necessary ways of promoting growth in the Christian life. However, they have often been mistakenly advocated as ways that an individual becomes a disciple: it is often advocated that once a Christian’s life is characterized by one or more of these commitments, the person becomes a disciple.

This is the root of much of the confusion today about discipleship, implying that discipleship is a second stage in the Christian life. There is an expression found among some that goes, “All disciples are Christians, but not all Christians are disciples.” In this view, discipleship is for an elite, more committed, or more specially trained person or group of Christians.

But this is surely not what Jesus intended us to understand about discipleship and disciple making. A more accurate conception is seen clearly when we go to Jesus’ final command, the Great Commission, where we understand that a person who believes on Jesus for salvation is a disciple at conversion. Jesus said that we are to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:18–20), not to make disciples out of Christians. So at the moment a person believes in Jesus and receives eternal life, that person becomes a disciple of Jesus, and the ongoing process of growth in the Christian life for all believers is discipleship.

Therefore, all true believers are disciples of Jesus; the point is whether or not they are obedient disciples. Further, in this more wholistic understanding, discipleship is not just one aspect of the church’s mission, but it encompasses all that the church does. Discipleship is the ministry of the church in helping all believers to grow in their discipleship to Jesus and reaching out to bring non-Christians to Jesus to become his disciples.

The prevalence of elitism in many of our traditions explains why many people are frustrated in their Christian life. A two-level conception of the Christian life promotes apathy among those who haven’t yet chosen to be committed, and it suggests that the higher level of commitment is optional, which in the daily world of most Christians means that commitment to Christlikeness is optional.

The fundamental picture of discipleship that we find in the pages of Scripture is the centrality of Jesus as the One we follow minute by minute through life, and a discipleship that has at its core a radical promise of transformation for all believers, not just a few specially committed ones.

Discipleship emphases of the past sixty years have focused upon isolated discipleship passages of Scripture or particular biblical discipleship themes in order to provide specialized ministry. However, this specialization has often come at the expense of a full biblical portrait of discipleship. A more complete definition of

what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ moves in the following direction:

Discipleship means living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ, growing in conformity to his image as the Spirit transforms us from the inside-out, being nurtured within a community of disciples who are engaged in that lifelong process, and helping others to know and become like Jesus.

Essentials of Discipleship for Disciple-Making Ministries

With this definition in mind, we can explore the following essential features of biblical discipleship that must characterize all of our attempts to develop a disciple-making ministry.

Discipleship originates with a gracious call from Jesus to enter into an intimate relationship with him.

In contrast to the form of discipleship found among the scribes and rabbis of Jesus' day, where a person earned the right to be called a disciple through intense study and commitment, Jesus called men and women to him to be his disciples solely and only on the basis of grace. Whether it was calling Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 4:18–22) or offering salvation to the citizens of the city of Ephesus (Eph. 2:8–9), discipleship to Jesus originates with a gracious call from Jesus, and it is a call that must be obeyed from the heart as we enter into an intimate, transforming relationship with him.

Discipleship must be grounded in a personal, costly relationship with a seeking Savior.

The new life that comes at regeneration cost Jesus, and it costs us. Although it is nothing we can buy, it is costly nonetheless. The cost is life. Jesus' life and our life. The cost of Jesus' life was given in his death on the cross. He came seeking those who were spiritually ill to make them well and fit for his kingdom. This initiative could only be accomplished through the penalty he paid for our sins in his loving act of redemption on the cross. He gave his life so that we might have life (1 Cor. 6:19–20; Mark 10:45).

The cost for us is likewise our life. While Jesus' death on the cross is unique, we also lose our life through taking up our own cross (Matt. 16:24–26).

Discipleship begins with intentional evangelism that challenges people to count the cost of accepting Jesus' call to life in the kingdom of God, which will prepare them to engage in and expect personal transformation as the normal Christian life.

Discipleship must begin with and strive toward a transformed identity in Jesus.

From the moment of salvation God views us differently. We have been born into a new identity as his children (John 1:12–13). We are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), who are now in process of being transformed into (2 Cor. 3:18), and conformed to (Rom. 8:29) the image of Christ, as Christ is being formed in us (Gal. 4:19).

Our identity as a disciple of Jesus affects all that we are, including the way we see ourselves, the way we relate to God, and the way we relate to others. Disciple-making ministries must help new and older Christians to find their identity in being Jesus' disciple in all of our relationships in the home, the workplace, the community, and the church.

Discipleship must be initiated and empowered by the Spirit of God.

The spiritual life that accompanied Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God was initiated by the Spirit of God (John 3:5–6). This phenomenon is described from different perspectives by different New Testament authors: regeneration (Titus 3:5); new birth and born again (1 Pet. 1:3, 23); spiritual resurrection (Rom. 6:13; Eph. 2:5) and new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10); God's seed in us (1 John 3:9).

We are different persons once the Spirit gives us new life. The supernatural work of God deep within our soul implants new spiritual life in us, and from that moment the direction of our lives is placed Godward as the Spirit begins to produce new life—the very life of Jesus—in ours.

John's gospel gives us three characteristics of Spirit-empowered discipleship that gives direction to our discipleship ministries:

Being set free from the lies of the world by Jesus' truth (John 8:31–32). This kind of freedom is the Spirit-empowered ability to do the right and good thing, the ability to choose God, to be liberated from sin's bondage. Discipleship means to help disciples to reject the lies of the world about our values and

goals, and to find freedom to live life the way that God intended it to be lived by continually hearing Jesus' truth about reality.

Being loved by Jesus means to love like Jesus (John 13:34–35). I define this kind of love as “an unconditional commitment to imperfect people in which we give ourselves to bring our relationships to God’s intended purpose.” Discipleship helps disciples to express this kind of love in our marriages, our parenting, and our relationships within the church and world. Helping disciples to experience Jesus’ love enables them to love others.

Bearing the fruit of being united to Jesus (John 15:7–8). Our ongoing transformation into the image of Christ comes through the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), which means that the Spirit of God is the central empowering agency of our discipleship to Jesus. Disciple-making ministries teach our people how to walk in the power of the Spirit, so that their lives exude the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of godly righteousness (Phil. 1:11; Col. 1:10).

Discipleship must be continually guided by God’s Word.

Discipleship ministries help their people to adopt a radical commitment to the authority of the Word of God as the absolute truth about reality. This is not simply the acquisition of truth, but the internalization of truth so that it expresses our worldview, characterizes our values, and conveys our entire lifestyle.

As we teach our people to know the Word of God, we equip them to compare God’s Word with the values of the world so that they can follow Jesus obediently in all of their circumstances (Matt. 28:20).

Discipleship must develop through a whole-life, life-long process of becoming more fully human.

Because of being created in the image of God, humans are like God and represent God in a way unlike any other creature (Gen. 1:27–31). The image of God is something in our nature as humans and refers to what we are (e.g., mentally, morally, spiritually, relationally), rather than something we have or do. Sin distorted the image of God in humans by affecting every aspect of our likeness to him, yet the restoration process has begun with our redemption in Christ (e.g., Col. 3:10).

Therefore, discipleship ministries help believers to develop in every area of life as whole persons, helping them to transition intentionally through all of life’s dimensions and stages, so that they are continually growing into his image. A disciple of Jesus is intent upon becoming more fully a disciple in every area of life.

I had a radical conversion to Jesus, away from a life of drugs and pleasure seeking. I discovered that my life as Jesus’ disciple helped me to become more the way that I was intended to be as a human created in God’s image. That continues to affect every area of my life, including my marriage and family life, my enjoyment of God’s creation as I surf or walk a mountain trail, or in my growth in serving Jesus in my profession.

Discipleship must be nurtured in communities of faith.

Each individual disciple enjoys a personal relationship with Christ that facilitates transformation into his image, but that personal relationship must be nurtured within two primary communities of faith—the spiritual family and the biological family.

The spiritual family is the church, entrance to which is based on obeying the will of the Father and experiencing the new birth (Matt. 12:46–50; John 1:12–13; Matt. 16:18). Brothers and sisters in Christ need one another as a spiritual community of faith to stimulate the growth of individuals as well as the body as a whole (Heb. 10:24–25; Eph. 4:11–13).

But the biological family continues to play a major role in God’s program. Marriage is a relationship in which husbands and wives mutually nurture each other’s transformation, while the parental role is designed to nurture children to know the will of God for their lives and help them to grow as whole persons reflecting the image of Christ (Eph. 5:22–6:4).

A disciple-making ministry accepts its responsibility to equip families so that husbands and wives can nurture each other and so that parents can nurture their own children. In turn, the responsibility of the family is to be the training grounds for the next generation of leaders within the church (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:4–5; Titus 1:6–7).

Discipleship is developed within the spiritual family and the biological family. Disciple-making ministries unite these two families and show how they work to support and strengthen each other.

Discipleship must be carried out by sojourning in our everyday, watching world.

In this earthly life, a human is a sojourner, a resident alien (Ps. 39:12). The creation awaits its renewal, and it groans under bondage to sin and decay (Rom. 8:19–22).

Regenerated disciples, however, live as people who have been set free from death and sin; our transformation has already begun. Therefore, we are at this time not of this world; our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and we are aliens and strangers in the world (1 Pet. 2:11).

Nonetheless, our purpose for being here is to advance the gospel message that has redeemed and transformed us, to be salt and light in a decayed and dark world, and to live out life in the way God intended life to be lived before a watching world (John 17:15–21).

Communities of faith are necessary for purposeful gathering away where believers are strengthened and equipped. But the growth and transformation that we experience is what enables us to live effectively with Jesus in this world. Our transformation enables us to live as sojourners in the world, and “live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:11–12).

Disciple-making churches help transformed disciples to know how to bear and exemplify the message of the gospel of the kingdom in our everyday realm of activities, offering the life of Jesus’ kingdom to a world that is dying without it.

Discipleship is not just another program, but transformation.

The tremendous privilege that we all have in the Christian life is to walk with Jesus as his disciples and to be continually transformed into his image as we grow in our discipleship to him. Our Lord Jesus is still at work calling men and women to follow him today, and our joyous task is to join him in fashioning our ministries to serve him to that end.

But this is not just another optional program (see sidebar, “Disciple Making and ‘Discipleship Programs’”). Rather, discipleship is central to all that we do. Discipleship is the expression of how God equips and transforms Christians for this life through the ministry of the church and parachurch ministries. As

a new, powerful wave of discipleship breaks upon the shores of our ministries, we have the joyous privilege of helping our people know how to surf it effectively. Disciple-making ministries help everyday men and women who are being transformed as Jesus’ disciples to be light in a dark place, and to be the living example of the hope of transformation that our world so desperately needs.

Disciple-making ministries help disciples of every age of life and stage of growth to know how to walk with Jesus and to be transformed by him in every area of life.

Adapted by the author from an article originally published in the journal *Enrichment* (Winter 2008): 41–46.

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