

Christ's Pattern for His Church

Implementing discipleship: *why we must be disciplined in the gospel*

By Jay Wegter

QUESTION # 1: *What is the crucial role of the gospel in discipleship? Isn't it true that a majority of believers only think of the gospel as the entrance into the Christian life?*

Our premise is that without an abiding commitment to live by the gospel, we sentence ourselves to fruitless Christianity. Why does fruitless Christianity exist? Authors Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp refer to the cause of fruitlessness as “the gospel gap,” other writers describe it as “cultural Christianity.” In a word it is the phenomenon of believers who are not radically identified with Christ and therefore are not producing the expected fruit of faith—they are ineffective and unproductive Christians. The *gospel gap* produces a different kind of Christianity, which we will call *cultural Christianity—a highly anemic reductionistic form of the faith*.

The term ‘gospel gap’ was coined to refer to Christians who have a very weak grasp of the following: *the present benefit of the work of Christ, the power of the cross, and the transforming reality of future hope*. We could almost say that they are not ‘fluent’ enough in the gospel to know how to live upon Christ as their life (Col 3:1-4). When the gospel gap is allowed to remain uncorrected, it produces a serious set of consequences: *we will miss out on lives that are gospel-shaped, Christ confident, and change-committed*. And, in place of those graces the remaining vacuum will be filled with other things—even religious things.ⁱⁱ Remember the master plan of spiritual maturity? It is: *conviction, character, competency*? Where the ‘gospel gap’ is the *status quo* (the accepted condition), you will find that progress in the Christian’s life is hamstrung. Note that conviction (‘head’), character (‘heart’), and competency (‘hand’, or competency and skill in ministry) are absolutely essential in the maturing process.ⁱⁱⁱ

The problem of pervasive cultural Christianity was addressed by William Wilberforce more than 200 years ago in his book, *Real Christianity*. Wilberforce argues that in the West we have settled for a cultural version of Christianity that is far from the real thing.^{iv} Unlike genuine Christianity, cultural Christianity is unmoved by spiritual realities and the precious things of God. Wilberforce observes that this unbiblical form of Christianity is characterized by adherents who have no spiritual eyes to behold the infinite riches of Christ; therefore they do not regard heavenly treasure as their primary pursuit in this life.^v (Regarding heavenly ‘treasure’ see Eph 1:15-18; 3:14-16.) In addition to these flaws (no spiritual eyes, little or no spiritual sight or savor), we also observe that cultural Christianity is not missional in its mindset and direction—it has no

controlling passion to advance the Kingdom of God. It is not sacrificially devoted to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Its expression of Christianity is compartmentalized and shrunken and, worst of all, is tailored to the tastes of the religious consumer.^{vi}

QUESTION # 2: *Does the above seem like too hard-hitting of a diagnosis? It may, but it is the first step in locating a 'gospel solution' to barrenness of cultural Christianity.*

A critique of contemporary Christianity is needed in order to emphasize that true discipleship (as the heart of the Great Commission) has fallen by the wayside—it is being neglected in even the most respected evangelical churches. And, we are paying a high price for ignoring discipleship. In defense of this observation, we note that throughout the history of the Church there has always been a tension between uncontested loyalty to Christ versus cultural Christianity's contentment with its religious externals. Singular devotion to Christ is never a private solitary matter, it always issues forth in faith-energized vision for ministry and truth-driven service to the body of Christ. Consecration to Christ is expressed by love to the brethren which is lived out by offering sacrificial help to them for their growth to maturity as Christ-followers.^{vii}

Assisting others in their spiritual growth is the very essence of discipleship (Col 1:28-29)—gladly obeying the 'people to people' commands in the Word of God. The scriptural answer to the gospel gap and cultural Christianity is intentional discipleship. We are members one of another—and Christ has called us to live as such (Eph 4:25). The church of Christ is like no other organization or community. It is animated by its Head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 4:14-16; Col 2:18-19). Its members have life in common in Christ and are organically joined to Him (1 Jn 1:1-3). The Head of this body is the glorious Lord of the universe. He rules His body by His infallible Word, the Scriptures. The members of His body are members one of another and are indwelt and empowered by His Spirit. Therefore, because of the uniqueness of the church and because of its supernatural origin and existence, and its part in God's 'glory story', human wisdom will always fail to produce a local church that is pleasing to Christ. For, manmade structure—if pressed too far will have a suffocating effect on the work of the Spirit of God.

QUESTON # 3: *Is being discipled in the gospel the necessary 'lens' for beholding the glory of God?*

Jonathan Edwards offers the scriptural insight that true spirituality is knowing, tasting, and seeing the beauty of God's holiness. What sets the saint apart from all others is that he sees the glory or beauty of divine things. The Bible speaks of this glory as the central thing that makes God and His ways attractive—that lures regenerate humans in love to Him. This is the light that makes the Person of Christ so ravishingly beautiful, that He has

drawn the hearts of millions to Himself for the last two millennia. This is the brightness that all saints see in comparison to which their own hearts appear filthy.^{viii}

What does the church become when deprived of the regular revelation of Christ's glory? In the first place, she becomes spiritually malnourished, for she was called into existence to glorify Christ and to commune with the Godhead by feeding upon Christ. It is by the church's intake of Christ that she is able to manifest Christ. Without this *feasting* upon the things of Christ, she will experience declension (decline), ineffectiveness. And, a descent into cold formalism and institutionalism is not foreign to any of us. For we have witnessed this same tendency toward lukewarm-ness in our own persons. We are all too familiar with the kind of spiritual chill that can come over the soul and numb its operations (Rev 2:4-5). It is Christ who has purchased His church—it exists for Him. He owns the church and rules the church by His infallible Word. When believers forget that Christ owns and rules His church and is enthroned upon her praises (1 Pet 2:1-10)—then there is an inescapable pull in the direction of man-centeredness.

As discipler-makers we must know why the gospel addresses the condition of the human heart. Paul chided the Corinthian believers for boasting in men (1 Cor 4:7). Why do we boast in human distinctions if God alone is the distinction-maker? In terms of receiving God's saving grace, the apostle states, "*Why do you boast as if you had not received it?*" Sin is not only lawlessness, it is self-justification, and it is religious pride. It is the desire to seek intrinsic differentiation from others by means of our personal exponents—this was at the heart of the Corinthian catastrophe. And, because we fallen insecure creatures due to original sin, in our hunger for status we tend to divide the human race up between those who are achieving a particular standard, and those who are not—a division between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Then, we draw from that distinction our differentiation from others. Christians are not exempt from this error—Corinth is proof. How we love our 'score cards'!^{ix}

The grace of God demands that we see ourselves from the divine perspective. This is absolutely essential in living out gospel community as a local church. Only the gospel gives us identity in the Lord instead of in our achievements. Because of the gospel, all true differentiation, all individual identity is a gift by grace which frees us from self (i.e. from 'self-justification'). This is part and parcel of 'grace living'. The redeemed have freedom and identity by a different 'measure' than the one applied by mankind—the child of God has status, favor, sonship, identity, acceptance, and standing ALL by divine grace through Christ. "*Who made you to differ (God alone), why are you boasting as if you did not receive it from someone (from Christ)?*" (1 Cor 4:6-7). It is easy to extrapolate from this that matchless grace is granted to us in Christ in order to give us true community.

QUESTION # 4: *If it is true that the gospel keeps defining for us our relationship with the Lord, why is that continual input so important for our disciple's spiritual growth?*

As disciples we must know that only the gospel can reverse our tendency to be self-justifiers. Self-justification is the action of defending our intrinsic worth. This defense of our intrinsic worth has manifestations called, 'flesh fruits' (Gal 5:19-21), which are all traceable to original sin. But, through the wonder of the 'guilt transfer' at Calvary's cross, Christ has brought believing sinners all the way to God (1 Pet 3:18). Left to our depravity, self under judgment cannot possibly experience close proximity to God or to others (Job 3:25). We require a substitute, or we will forever be banished from God's presence, favor, life, love, light, and blessedness.^x The good news of the gospel is about God's action to accomplish such a work of *guilt transfer* by substitution. God alone is free to affect that moral transfer (Jn 1:29; 10:18; Rom 6:23). Christ died for me—this is a one-to-one substitution (Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 7:25). We who believe have life by His blood (Lev 17:11; Rev 7:13-14). Christ voluntarily assumed our moral liabilities, our guilt, and our condemnation. He became of no reputation. He was sold under sin and thus paid the price of that sin as our substitute (Rom 7:14). This gospel reality of guilt exchange is the foundation of why our relationship with the Lord shapes all of our other relationships.

First, as disciples we must know why the gospel is good news. The gospel is only incredibly good news if we realize that the human condition was a kind of dead end—like a cul de sac. There is no escape; no exit except by guilt transfer—without that guilt transfer, all of our hopes, dreams, and meaningful relations will turn to ashes once we enter our death bed. The wonder of redemption is that we are dealing with “the atoned for, and the atoning God.” God has plucked out His own heart in the bruising of His Son for us (Is 53:10). He has “split” Himself so to speak in order to accomplish this guilt transfer. His requirement of moral perfection in the human being necessitated a guilt transfer in order for us to be restored to Him.^{xi} Now the dynamics of our blood-bought life in Christ free us to radical honesty in our biblical self-confrontation. The gospel has set us free from self-justification (from attempting to prop up self by enforcing distinctions from others). Therefore, because our status in Christ is immutable, we can afford to face the worst things about ourselves without fear of being diminished. This is the dynamic for close, caring relationships (the vehicle of discipleship). Christians comprise ‘a new humanity’ for the believer's life is “life as it is” and “life as God imputes to us through Christ.” This is a formula for radical heroism in dealing with personal sin. It is a formula for humility, for service, for true community—for intimacy through Christ—for trust and closeness—for freedom from paralyzing self-consciousness, and endless guilt-laden disputes of conscience accompanied by morbid introspection.

QUESTION # 5: *So, if the liberty of the gospel takes us off ourselves so that we begin to behold Christ as a habit of life, how would that affect our personal holiness?*

As disciples we must know why the gospel as the glory of Christ is the indispensable key to ongoing holiness. We must frequently meditate on the glory of Christ to be free from earthly cares and sinful affections. “*But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit*” (2 Cor 3:18). Only the saved see and savor the glory of Christ. God’s glory in the face of Christ ought to be the aim of gospel preaching. If we conceal the glory of Christ, we cripple the sanctifying work of the Spirit who wishes to exalt Christ and reveal His glory to the saints (Jn 16:14). Christ as revealed in the gospel is our *totalizing worldview*; we are to see all of life through Him—all of our purpose, desire, direction, and hope emanates from Him.^{xii} Only a continual view of the glory of Christ will stir us up and encourage us to watch and continually fight against the deceitful workings of sin. To experience the things of Christ’s glory has the power to make us want to do the things that please Him (2 Cor 5:9). This is essential in training our disciples in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Seeing Christ’s glory is the only way to obtain holiness, comfort, and preparation for eternal life. The chief privilege in this life is to ‘see’ the glory of God in all His holiness displayed in Christ.^{xiii} Our sin, guilt, lust, cravings, insecurities, and desire for happiness—all combine to make the soul restless. Christ has everything the sinner needs (and He imparts much of it through the Body of Christ). In all things He is perfectly suited to all the needs and cravings of the immortal soul. “All my springs are in Thee” (Ps 87:7).^{xiv} To believingly ‘see’ God in our nature, dying and bleeding for us, eradicates our sinful fear and suspicion of God, and it sets us free to love one another. Faith in the gospel opens up to the understanding Christ’s full sacrifice, for Christ is the essence of the gospel. “If I see Him who is the atonement to be God-man, then I see an offering so vast and so extensive in its applications, that every crevice of the conscience must be reached.”^{xv}

We have no life in ourselves. The saints are dependent upon God for continual communication of His goodness and power to them. Christ continues to supply spiritual life, grace, and strength to His redeemed people. The goodness, grace, life, light, mercy, and power which are the origin of the new creation are all of God’s origin. It pleased the Father that the fullness of God’s divine nature should be in Christ as Head of the church (Col 1:17-19). These qualities in Christ are communicated from Him to His church—He makes them available to the church.^{xvi} This revelation of Christ in the gospel is our ‘food’—without a steady diet of Christ as He is displayed to the saints in the gospel, the church cannot fulfill her mission.

QUESTION # 6: *How does beholding Christ's glory in the gospel form desires in the believer/disciple to minister to others?*

The power of Christ's love received has an effect upon our lives of enabling us to bear fruit for the glory of God. We must not be content to think of the love of Christ in a general way. Instead, we must dwell upon God's wisdom, goodness, and grace shown in eternal acts of His divine nature and pity—all given to us in Christ. The church cannot maintain its fervency apart from communion with Christ. When He comes and shows Himself amidst our Scripture meditation and communion with Him, He brings with Him peace, comfort, joy, and assurance. Christ's intent is that we *'feast'* with Him by means of these spiritual refreshments (Rev 3:20). How are we to receive these things? Look on the glory of Christ by faith. Meditate on the glory of His unique nature—His humbling of Himself to come into the world—His present high position in heaven—His love and grace. Our hearts will be spiritually affected in some degree by His constraining love (2 Cor 5:14)—which is the source of all our spiritual comforts and power. Christ knows perfectly the eternal blessedness which will be enjoyed by those who believe in Him (Jn 10:10).^{xvii}

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Without the experience of these things (the spiritual comforts Christ brings), our Christianity is heartless, lifeless, and useless. Without a steady diet of Christ as He is displayed to the saints in the gospel, the church cannot fulfill her mission. This revelation of Christ in the gospel is the source of our ongoing transformation (2 Cor 3:18). We can say we believe the promises about the eternal glories of heaven, but where is the proof of our faith if we do not experience the enjoyment of these spiritual blessings here and now? (Rom 15:13; 1 Pet 1: 3-9). We must take a steady view of Christ's glory—and seek Him with all our heart. In this way alone will the believers who collectively make up the church recover from stagnancy. Christ's glory alone will bring us back to joy—to love in *our hearts, in our souls, and in our relationships.*^{xviii}

QUESTION # 7: *Since this concept of beholding the glory of the Lord begins now, what effects does beholding His glory now have upon our preparation for heaven?*

Only those who are committed to beholding the glory of Christ now are truly pressing on to that perfect view of the glory of Christ in heaven. Believers who are delighted to see the glory of Christ experience Christ's transforming power. Those who make it their full purpose of heart to behold His glory will be changed into His image (2 Cor 3:18). When our trust in Christ is constantly exercised, virtue proceeds from Christ to purify our hearts, increase our holiness, strengthen our graces, and fill us with joy—at times joy inexpressible filled with glory (1 Pet 1:8). Christ's glory beheld quickens the understanding at the same time as His love is communicated to the heart.

At salvation the Spirit of God grants the believing sinner an eternal relationship with the Triune God through Christ. Our walk in the Spirit is to be characterized by diligently caring for this relationship which has been graciously granted. Many believers need to rethink their definition of salvation because it is common to conceive of salvation as a kind of spiritual commodity rather than what it really is: knowing the glory of God in Christ and knowing all that God is toward us in Christ. To be in possession of eternal salvation is to be a partaker of a relationship graciously granted by the Spirit of God. Sanctification is to diligently care for that relationship given. God's saving grace is relational from top to bottom—from start to finish. False professors discount this pervasive truth—making salvation into a body of impersonal merit composed of Christ's morality plus theirs. Discipleship involves guiding and helping one another learn to care for, and maintain their relationship with the Lord (1 Thess 2:10-12; 2 Thess 2:13-15).

QUESTION # 8: *How does the gospel provide the right motives for sanctification?*

Gospel discipleship stresses that justification drives sanctification. God accepts us in the Beloved. Our righteous status in Christ is the basis for our sanctification. Thus, the Pauline model of sanctification is grounded in gospel discipleship: our practice and walk is founded upon our position in Christ. This dynamic is seen in the relationship between the indicative (what God has accomplished in Christ) and the imperative (our commensurate walk enjoined) which characterizes Paul's epistles. The indicative drives the imperative. The benefits of utilizing our mind to dwell on things above (Col 3:1-2) (or gospel realities) are manifold. When we do so, our fellowship with God increases; for when God is honored in our truthful and adoring thinking about Him, we are holding communion with Him and He manifests His presence to us. When you practice dwelling on things above, you'll abide in Christ as a habit (Eph 3:14-19). Your perception of the reality of the heavenly sphere will become increasingly influential in your life. Your confidence and comfort in God will increase. And your love and devotion to Christ will be more consistent. "Setting your mind upon things above" is a parallel passage with Romans 13:14 which commands the believer to *put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regards to its lusts*. When we *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*, we are entering, by way of meditation, the sphere of things above where Christ is all-sufficient and preeminent. The cross has severed the believer from the world (Gal 6:14). The cross has united the believer to Christ so that all the benefits of Christ's dying and rising now belong to the Christian. The cross reminds us *what we were saved from* and the cross constantly tells us *what we are saved to be*. Thus, the cross not only defines the believer as a son, a servant, and a disciple; and the cross also marks out our path—it tells us what we've left behind and where we are headed. Through the work of the cross we are *already*

new creatures with a new bias against sin. We are *already* members of the new covenant; we are sealed, and we are members of Christ's Body. It is the cross that tells us *who we are in Christ* now, and it is the resurrection that tells us *what we will be in Christ* at the resurrection (1 Jn 3:2). Presently the Kingdom of God is *within* the believer. At the resurrection (*the not yet*), the Kingdom of God will be a global, physical reality.

QUESTION # 9: *Since the gospel opens up the relationship between God's grace and our striving to live righteously, shouldn't that be a controlling truth for a disciple to master?*

When we instruct our disciples concerning the relationship between the already and the not yet, we are setting forth the biblical reasons to order our lives in view of eternity. In 1 John 2:28, the Apostle John summarizes the reasons why we are to live in light of the resurrection, "*And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.*" This begs the question: is sanctification merely moral obligation? Or, is it based upon the gracious reality of a new identity, a new status, a new relationship, and a new power source? Christ traded places with the sinner so that the believer might be justified. Our growth is anchored in the fact that our relationship with God is forever settled in Christ. Now, who God is toward us in Christ has become our world, it fills our horizon; it is an endless source of joy. Our desire set on the precious things of God deepens our eternal value system. The power of the cross is seen in its ability to *detach us* from the world (Gal 5:14), and *attach us* to the Lord (Rom 6:5ff.).

Justification in Christ by faith through grace is God's 'preemptive strike' against legalism, self-righteousness, and perfectionism (Rom 4:1-8ff.). This reality of divine grace 'up front' radically changes our motivations for pursuing sanctification. God's preemptive strike slays our carnal motives to perfect ourselves, or base our standing with God on our achievements. If we see the practical value of justification, then we will find our motives for holiness to flow from the following: a desire to care for our love relationship with the Lord, to live a life of gratitude; to offer ourselves back to God as a lifestyle, to live as God's beloved and holy possession (Rom 6:11-13).

QUESTION # 10: *Does this dynamic of gospel transformation play a major role in guarding the believer from living a compartmentalized life?*

A substantial part of our progress in sanctification is to continually address our tendency toward living disconnected lives. In other words, when the gap widens between what we say we believe and how we live, we will need to admit that we are engaged in a disconnect. The greater the disconnect, the further we are sliding into carnality and hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is deadly dangerous. It can move the soul into deep presumption

and self-deception concerning one's spiritual state (see Hebrews chapters 3 and 4). Sanctification keeps putting the disconnect to death; it mortifies the disconnect. This involves pursuing a non-compartmentalized, unified Christian life experience. Only the gospel consistently applied can give us a *united heart* which is loyal to the Lord (Ps 86:11)—aspiring after what the Puritans referred to as 'universal obedience' (a holistic, comprehensive obedience). The full-orbed gospel permeates every area of life—it is designed to have a holistic effect upon the believer, in other words, no compartments.

Our propensity is to forget the gospel—not the least reason being that the gospel is 100% counterintuitive. Utilizing the means of grace is essential to a unified Christian life. Our gospel focus is *care for your relationship with the Lord which has been given by grace at the moment of salvation. Fixing your mind upon all God is toward you in Christ removes the element of “just do it”—or, “grind out your religious duty.”* Religious duty moves to delight only when the spiritual affections are engaged. All God is toward us in Christ must be displayed to our affections (all God is toward me in Christ includes His sovereign initiation which invited me into His Kingdom plot with its unspeakable majesty and infinite dimensions and eternal scope). Our hearts are incredibly restless in their search for an object of desire and happiness to pursue. True happiness is inseparable from holiness, therefore happiness is the byproduct of this pursuit of God in Christ and the glory of Christ. God's 'glory story' is infinitely captivating—that He is accomplishing His own glory, and our highest good through Christ—He has joined His glory to our eternal good in the Person of His Son.

Our religious flesh welcomes a performance approach to the Christian life. Thus, a gospel-centered walk is one of first things we have to learn if we are going to effectively disciple others. Because of our bent toward pride and independence, our flesh actually opposes God's grace. As a result it is easy for our piety to consist of a set of religious duties and minimal check marks which we have jammed into a compartment in our lives. This is why it is so crucial for our discipleship efforts to begin with the grace of God in the gospel. Carnal wisdom tends to treat discipleship as an extended 'download' of religious information and requirements. A disciple can be left with the impression that, "Each week my mentor is showing me more stuff I have to do." Remember, the law approach to God comes natural to us; the grace approach has to be learned over time. Only when we are 'gospel-saturated' will we begin to live upon Christ as our ultimate 'Source Person' and grow in His grace and in our knowledge of Him as a blessed result (2 Pet 3:18).

QUESTION # 11: *What are some of the things we can do in our discipling of others which will keep the emphasis on transformation instead of merely information?*

The disciple-maker as well as the disciple is also a growing, Christ-follower. Therefore,

he is learning through the discipleship relationship as well as his disciple. Here are some suggested questions and topics that can bring added ‘realism’ to discipling in the gospel. *Why is it so hard for us as believers to learn that Christ carries our status before God? Though discipling others is to be deliberate, it is also to be a lifestyle of love and spiritual parenting—discipleship is the most grace-based when we are not carrying the burden of whether or not our efforts succeed in the short term. How can we stress that true discipleship involves radical self-denial: dying to self and dying to the flesh and its desires? (See Gal 5:24; 6:14-15; Rom 8:12-13.) How can we keep checking to see if the heart affections are being reached in our discipleship efforts? If training in righteousness is helping the disciple learn to obey what Christ has commanded, shouldn’t the disciple welcome feedback regarding his level of obedience? Why should the following ‘gospel grid’ permeate every area of our discipleship curriculum: Who the believer is in Christ; and who God is toward the believer in Christ? Think of some specific questions which would target your disciple’s identity in Christ and union with Christ. What kinds of questions could you ask to uncover false assumptions about God’s involvement in their circumstances, relationships, suffering, sinful habits, etc.*

End Notes

ⁱ Timothy Lane, Paul Tripp, *How People Change*, pp. 3-4, 6-8

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Ernie Baker, “MVP Statement,” Men’s Ministry CVCC

^{iv} William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, Regal Publishing, 2006, p. 24

^v Ibid, pp. 42-43, 53, 68

^{vi} Ibid, pp. 71-72

^{vii} Ibid, pp. 76-81

^{viii} Gerald R. McDermott, “Jonathan Edwards on Revival, Spiritual Discernment, and God’s Beauty,” *Reformation and Revival* 6:1 Winter 1997

^{ix} Paul F. M. Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, pp. 54-55

^x Ibid, pp. 56-57

^{xi} Ibid, pp. 68, 70, 76-77

^{xii} John Piper, *God is the Gospel*

^{xiii} John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*

^{xiv} A. A. Bonar, *The Person of Christ*

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Ibid.