

Are your Membership Classes designed to make Disciples?

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How do we as disciple-makers challenge members of the Body of the Christ to live as true disciples of Christ? It must begin with vision-casting. We must be explicit in stating what Christ requires of every genuine convert. Every true believer is called to live as Christ's disciple. This is what our Lord meant when He spoke of following Him: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me'" (Mt 16:24). Our Lord has laid out very specific terms of discipleship in passages such as Luke 9:23-26.

We cannot live effectively as His disciples without a commitment to spiritual disciplines. The more spiritually disciplined you are, the more usable and available you will be to God. The spiritual disciplines include, faithful study, meditation upon, and personal application of the Word of God; regular consistent prayer; fellowship in the Body of Christ for the purpose of mutual edification; corporate worship, and personal evangelism.

A true servant of Christ is both available to the Lord, and is growing in his competency to communicate the Word of God—this is intimately tied to being spiritually disciplined. For, Christ has called us to continually speak and 're-speak' the truth in love (Eph 4:15; 5:19).

The central term, or requirement of discipleship given by our Lord is cross-bearing, or self-denial (Mt 16:24-26). We may define cross-bearing as follows: it is doing whatever it takes to make Christ first place in your life, so that His authority as King and Master is uncontested (2 Cor 5:15). Cross-bearing does not terminate upon private piety, as if that is the end goal. No, the greatest mark of cross-bearing is the believer's availability to others for the sake of their edification (Rom 15:1-2). Those who bear the cross of Christ are committed to develop others spiritually, contributing to their growth (Rom 15:14). Now this kind of challenge to live as Christ's obedient disciple overturns the error that your relationship with Jesus can exist in a private, anonymous container.

One of the great benefits of disciple-making is that the hearer (the one being disciplined) is continually confronted with what it means to be a doer of the Word (Jas 1:21-24). How are we to teach others to observe all that Christ has commanded without discipleship relationships? Learning that kind of obedience is next to impossible without discipleship. For, only through the soul care found in discipleship are the relational structures in place for accountability, nurture, and the actual monitoring of obedience. Effectively serving your brethren through discipleship flows out of a life in which your personality, desires, experience, and gift mix are dedicated to Christ for His use (Rom 12:1-2). That is what it means to be available to Christ.

The shepherding, or pastoral dimension of discipleship involves helping the sheep build meaningful connections and spiritual partnerships for the purpose of spiritual growth. Rather than solely building dependent relationships upon himself, a truly strong shepherd helps others in the body form relationships with one another for the purpose of spiritual growth. This

is vitally necessary in our consumer-oriented culture which tends to privatize every aspect of life. By contrast, shepherds help the sheep keep understanding that Christ, the Chief Shepherd wants them to enjoy life-on-life, one-on-one, soul care for the purpose of mutual edification.

Life-on-life discipleship is intensely practical. Every bit of our personal instruction must be wedded to implementation. Here are the four points that will assist us in our efforts to join every biblical truth we teach to all of life: 1) strive for simplicity, 2) always emphasize the head-heart connection, 3) always flesh out specific application for every truth, 4) be sure to merge the godly masculinity of men's ministry with disciple-making, for men's discipleship looks much different than women's discipleship.

The priority of the Great Commission is central in answering the following questions: What kind of believers are we growing in our churches? Are we absolutely committed to making Kingdom people committed to the mission of the church as defined by Christ?

We reiterate that today's pervasive consumerism tends to privatize religion. That kind of attitude stunts growth because the consumer mindset seldom rises above the following attitudes: "What will help me?" "How can I stay within my comfort zone?" Christ taught the polar opposite of consumerism—i.e. death to the dominion of the flesh (death to the self-directed life): "And He was saying to *them* all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it'" (Lu 9:23-24). "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him" (Jn 12:25-26).

The genuine Christian life has a remarkably public dimension. The passages about walking worthy of the Lord are fleshed out in a corporate manner (Eph 4:1-3). Your life as a Christ-follower is very public. Confessing Christ as a lifestyle is a public exercise with an extensive corporate dimension (Mt 10:32-39; Lu 14:25-35).

One who begins as a Christ-follower is compared to someone building a tower. If he quits halfway that half-built structure will mock his hasty efforts, his poor planning, and his unwillingness to pay the cost (Luke 14:28-30). Therefore, Christ-followers need to know right away that every single Christian is a minister of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-21). They need to know what the cost is of following Christ.

In Scripture true believers are depicted collectively Christ's body on earth. There are to be no passive 'body parts'. In this analogy from 1 Corinthians chapter 12, when a body part is healthy and functioning the rest of the body enjoys the vigor, support and contributions of that member. But if a part of the body is paralyzed; atrophied, or non-functional, such as a finger, an arm, an eyelid, then the rest of the body must favor, and carry that inactive part. How powerful this metaphor is, for every member of the body exists to nurture disciples and move them closer to Christ (Eph 4:20; Col 2:19). There must be no fruitless spectators or mere 'passengers' in Christ's body. Disciple-making helps guard against passivity in the body.

There is a logical pathway for bringing each member to maturity. But most churches

leave that pathway unmarked and undefined. If we were to state the pathway to maturity in somewhat general terms, we could say that an immature believer begins attending church at first as a part of the ***crowd***. If he is to grow he must become part of the ***community*** where meaningful and vital relationships are formed. Next out of these meaningful relationships he becomes ***committed*** to growing and helping others grow. Out of that ***commitment*** to help others grow he becomes part of a ***core*** that is characterized by a very visible lifestyle of ministry and spiritual leadership.

Now every true believer is somewhere on this maturity spectrum. But our job as under-shepherds who serve Christ is to help each believer along the path of maturity so that we may ultimately ‘present every man complete in Christ’ (Col 1:28-29). We should station people along the path of maturity to help disciples at every stage of growth.

Here are my ‘seven M’s’ to help us plot a path to maturity: 1) ***meet*** the disciple to form a spiritual partnership, 2) ***map*** his level of spiritual growth by the biblical metric, 3) ***mentor*** him, training him in righteousness from the Word, 4) ***model*** discipleship so that he can see as well as imitate the example of your life, 5) cultivate a ***missional mindset*** in him so that he understands his growth exists to help others grow in Christ, 6) teach him that discipleship ***mediates ministry*** because as his ***mentor*** you are most qualified to ***mobilize*** him and unleash him to the ministry opportunities that are uniquely fitted for him, 7) ***multiplication***—show your disciple that the growth he has experienced is intended for him to make another disciple who can make another disciple.

Now what is vital here is that this cannot be reduced to hard edge steps or to an annual church program. Growth as Christ’s disciple is holistic—it is organic like a living thing. It is inseparable from the race we are running—it is our union with Christ lived out in relationships of mutual care and edification. There will be stops and starts; times of decline and renewal; fruitfulness and fallowness. But growth is certain to come because discipleship involves running the race with endurance—it is long obedience in the same direction aided by life-on-life soul care (Heb 3:12-13; 10:23-25; 12:1-6). Love, faithfulness, and truth is the soil of growth.

Disciple-making is Christ’s pattern for our lives. Every believer is organically joined to Christ who is ‘our life’ (Col 3:4). Disciple-making is how we express this reality of being alive in Christ. It is how we reflect and live out Christ in us (Col 1:27ff.).

The disciple-making challenge we issue to the body of Christ begins with understanding our identity in Christ. Every genuine believer is part of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:11-14). And consequently, every member of the body of Christ has a spiritual gift which Paul designates, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit’ (1 Cor 12:4-7ff.). The Spirit’s work in energizing and developing the body is made ‘manifest’ through the exercise of each believer’s gift—unto the common good of the body. We have a gospel in common, a Savior in common, and indwelling Spirit in common, a mission in common, and yet each member is unique. In examining this uniqueness factor, we would stress that a life direction of faithfully confessing Christ is not divorced from the believer’s authenticity (Rom 12:3).

As the believer expresses his commitment to Christ through faithfulness in exercising

his spiritual gift and in attention to the spiritual disciplines, he becomes increasingly available and useful to the Master. But, his sharing of spiritual truths is not merely a rote regurgitation of what he has been taught. No, his sharing is joined to his personality, his experiences, his desires, and his gifts. As ministry increasingly becomes the believer's lifestyle, he is not only sharing spiritual truths, he is also sharing out of the overflow of his Christian walk, for out of the abundance of our heart the mouth speaks (Mt 12:34).

Even though Paul was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, he was eager to fellowship with the Roman believers, knowing that he would be encouraged by their faith as it was expressed by their uniqueness, experiences, gifts, love, and spiritual passion (Rom 1:11-12).

Now concerning the masculine nature of men's ministry, as brothers in Christ we are increasingly shaped and formed by the gospel so that our masculine gifting to influence and lead becomes available to Christ. When the gospel has full sway, the courage to pursue one another for the sake of building with Christ will become normative for believing men. Godly masculinity cannot flourish if a man remains within the confines of his comfort zones. Yes, there is a risk factor in ministry—but it is a glorious one because the Holy Spirit meets our efforts with His enabling power. As men, we must push ourselves and dedicate ourselves to developing others. Finding great joy in giving of ourselves and our resources will gradually become the 'sweet spot' for a true Christ-follower (1 Thess 2:1:6-10; 2:14).

Christ's blueprint for His church is the Great Commission. The Master has mandates for every church member, and these spiritual imperatives are intimately joined to the work of disciple-making. There are more than five mandates, but we can summarize them under five heads. 1) *maturity*, present each member complete in Christ, through proclaiming Christ, teaching and admonishing, 2) *be renewed in the spirit of your mind*, be transformed by the Word, 3) *engage in mutual edification*, contribute to the growth of others, 4) *walk in holiness* with the Holy One, for there must be a very clear echo of holiness in those who walk with the Lord, 5) *pray without ceasing* and *bear one another's burdens* which is Christian love.

Discipleship involves teaching one another to obey what Christ has commanded of His people (Mt 28:20). Investing in disciples and nurturing them includes the blessed task of showing believers the resources in Christ they have been given for the sake of obedience. With each resource we have been given in Christ, there is a commensurate responsibility. By way of example: the believer is a possessor of peace with God (Rom 5:1); therefore, he is to let the peace of Christ 'umpire' in his heart (Col 3:15).

The things that Christ requires His people to obey are best learned in a relational space of discipleship. "Teaching them to observe . . ." (Mt 28:20) takes place through *mastering*, *mentoring*, *modeling*, and *monitoring* obedience. In *mastering* and *modeling*, we think of Ezra's commitment to diligently study the Word of God in order to practice it (obey it). "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).

This 'relational space' is both personal and in the community of believers. In the church, both older and younger faithful men and women are to be examples (*modeling* godliness): "Older

men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance” (Titus 2:2) (see Titus 2:3-5). And in terms of the example to be set by a younger servant of the Lord, Paul says of Timothy: “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but *rather* in speech, conduct, love, faith *and* purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:12). In disciple-making relationships, the factor most easily neglected is the *monitoring* factor. For, that is where high accountability enters in. But we really begin to see the *monitoring* factor at work in the apostles’ discipling of the Thessalonian believers:

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, *how* working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and *so is* God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we *were* exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father *would* his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe (1 Thess 2:9-13).

Jesus has told us that in disciple-making a full embrace of the reproduction factor is backbone of multiplication: “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Lu 6:40) (see also 2 Tim 2:2). Spiritual parenting is the normal way of relating in discipleship (1 Thess 2:7-12). Spiritual parenting is ‘broad spectrum’—it includes all four dimensions: *mastering, mentoring, modeling, and monitoring* obedience.

Now living one’s life as Christ’s disciple represents a vast paradigm shift, for historically the church has often failed to define its mission by the Great Commission. But if the church has not defined its mission by the Great Commission it will tend to see disciple-making as a necessary duty, perhaps like an annual flu shot (as if a little token attention to discipleship is all that is needed).

In a healthy church where ministry is characterized by disciple-making, home fellowships and cell groups will tailor their ministry emphases so that they serve the Master’s plan to make disciples. This ‘cross-pollination’ of disciple-making with home fellowships is absolutely essential if the Great Commission is to be mainstreamed.

It only takes ten percent of a church to be completely onboard with disciple-making in order for that mandate to become a movement. Ten percent seems to be that magic number where momentum can not only be maintained but also grow. This is great news, because you as a Christian leader don’t have to convince every single person in your church of the necessity of disciple-making. Once you reach a few key people with the discipleship vision, they in turn will become vision-casters who begin to model disciple-making for all the church to see. This represents an ‘*ah ha*’ or eureka moment when church members begin to understand that you cannot take discipleship out of the center of the mission of the church. Why? Because according to our Lord, disciple-making is the heart beat, sum and substance of ministry. As Christ-

followers, disciples are who we are, and disciple-making is what we do.

For, our commitment to Christ and His Great Commission is inseparable from who we are, what we do, how Christ is formed in us, and how we accomplish His mission. This ‘ah ha’ moment creates a mind shift in which brightly illuminates God’s purpose for our lives (Rom 8:28-30). For, the gospel’s intent is not only to bring us to God, it is to make us like Jesus, and that can only happen in timely manner if we have shepherds, mentors, and disciple-makers who will teach us to observe what Christ Himself has commanded.