

A MINISTRY OF DISCIPLESHIP[©]

The word *disciple* in the Gospels is a common term describing followers of a person or group. Even the Pharisees had disciples. However, among Jesus' disciples there was a hierarchy from the multitudes who followed Jesus to the twelve who were personally selected by Him to be Apostles. There was a marked distinctiveness to the discipling of this chosen few that extended beyond Jesus' ministry to the multitudes. For three years, He ministered among them and then He instructed them to continue the ministry after His death. These disciplined ones were then commissioned by the resurrected Christ in a perpetuation of discipleship, the hallmark of which was reproduction.

JESUS' MODEL OF DISCIPLESHIP

In the Gospel accounts, discipleship is demonstrated by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as He teaches the Word of God and performs the work of God among His disciples. Jesus began His ministry of discipleship with a specific call (Mark 1:16-20; 2:14), which defined a particular ministry (Mark 3:14), required a personal commitment (Matt 4:20, 22; Mark 1:20; Luke 5:11), and demanded exclusive allegiance (Mark 8:34). This then becomes the model of discipleship for the church today.

THE PROCESS OF DISCIPLESHIP

The Mandate to Disciple

Exercising the authority that was given to Him by God the Father, Jesus Christ commanded His disciples to make disciples. Although the Great Commission was given to the eleven disciples, it is also considered to be a directive for the church because (1) the charge to the disciples to "make disciples" necessitates reproducing the discipleship process that they had learned from Jesus, (2) the rite of baptism, a component of discipling, is also one of the ordinances of the church, and (3) Jesus' promise to be with them did not end with the death of the disciples, but continues until the "end of the age."

The Attributes of a Disciple-Maker

Serving in Love. As believers today seek to emulate Jesus as a discipler, we must understand that discipleship is a process that our Lord began with a relationship. Jesus showed His love as He manifested an attitude of acceptance with His disciples. They were often portrayed as coming to Him (Matt 5:1). They shared their astonishment (Matt 19:25) and admitted their lack of understanding (Matt 21:20). He defended them against their accusers (Matt 9:14; 12:3), took time to answer their questions (Matt 13:10-23, 36-43), and called them His family (Matt 12:49).

Yet He admonished them for their unbelief (Matt 8:26) and hardness of heart (Mark 8:17), tested them to increase their faith (Luke 8:22-25), and rebuked their selfishness (Luke 22:24-26). He warned them of the cost of discipleship (Matt 10:16-23), challenging them to total commitment (Matt 10:37-39; Luke 14:26-35). He loved them and demonstrated that love through His death on the cross for their sins (John 21:15; 15:13).

As makers of disciples, we must model His love in our relationship to those whom we disciple. It is important to demonstrate a willingness to listen to their problems, to reassure them when they falter, to encourage them when they are disheartened, to gently rebuke their sinfulness and forgive their offenses to you. As we thus replicate the loving, servant attitude of our Lord, the relationship will become an incubator for discipleship.

Ministering with Godliness. In the Gospels, Jesus used miracles to demonstrate Himself to be the Son of God and to validate His message as the Word of God. In His absence, the

Holy Spirit uses the Word of God as the validation for biblical discipleship. As Jesus glorified the Father in performing His work (John 17:4), the Holy Spirit will glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:14) through the disciple in ministry by an attitude of humility and expressions of thanksgiving and praise to Him.

In addition, as a discipler manifests a life of godliness, Christ-like characteristics will both serve as a mirror to the disciples of the true Discipler and display a life worthy of reproducing. Imitation is one of the by-products of discipleship (Luke 6:40), but it is essential for the discipler to turn the focus of our disciples to Jesus Christ that they might become followers of Him.

Living the Ministry. Ministry was Jesus' life and for Him discipleship was the sharing of that life ministry. Foundational to discipleship is the modeling of ministry by the discipler. Jesus appointed the twelve "that they might be with Him" (Mark 3:14). They ate together, traveled together, and ministered together (Luke 8:1). The twelve had a privileged place of closeness, receiving more intense instruction and explanation than the other followers of Christ (Matt 13:11).

In the Gospels, discipleship combined ministering with explaining, showing with teaching, and miracles with discourses. After the call of the disciples, they followed Jesus throughout Galilee as He was teaching, proclaiming the gospel, and healing people (Matt 4:23). If discipleship is going to be learned, it must be a lifestyle that is shared.

A three-step process in discipleship is disclosed in the Gospels as Jesus' disciples are first seen as passive as they observe Jesus (Matt 8:23; 9:19), then cooperative as they share the ministry to Israel by going out in pairs preaching and healing (Matt 10:1-7; Mark 6:12), and finally totally active as they are given the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).

There must be a commitment on the part of the discipler to allow the disciples to observe various aspects of ministry and gradually share in the performance of the work. As the ministry is thus experienced by disciples, it will become theirs. They will share in the blessings and grow through the persecutions. But they will learn to be disciples and by so learning, they will gain insight into the process of making a disciple.

The Selection of Disciples

As Jesus exhibited selection in calling His disciples (Mark 1:16-20; 2:14; Luke 9:59-62), disciple-makers must be particular in their choice of potential disciples. The first step is seeking God's will through prayer (Luke 6:12-13).

Many people listened to Jesus' teaching but only a few were chosen as His disciples. Therefore, in the selecting of a disciple it will take time to become acquainted with and evaluate potential disciples among our students. They must demonstrate growing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and exhibit obedience to the Word of God (John 2:11, 22; 8:31). When we evaluate those under our ministry, it will become apparent which ones are most responsive to us as teachers and to our teaching of the Word of God.

Recommendation by others is also a valuable technique in choosing disciples. Andrew brought His brother to Christ; Philip found Nathanael (John 1:41, 45). Those who know your students well will know of their commitment and potential. In selecting disciples there is to be an emphasis on timeliness and commitment. At the occasion of their calling, Jesus' disciples exhibited a preparedness to respond to His command to follow Him (Luke 5:12). Those who would become disciples must manifest a desire for discipleship. They must also be teachable (Luke 11:1). And there must be a willingness to make the commitment to discipleship. A time commitment of weekly discipleship sessions over a period of three years

is suggested. The steps then in selecting a disciple are: prayer, observation, evaluation, recommendation, challenge, and acceptance. At this point the training can intensify.

The Essence of Discipleship

Obedience to the Word of God. The importance of the Word of God in discipleship is verified in Jesus' directive to the disciples in Matthew 28:19:20 to make disciples "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." This is a two-step process which probably occurs concurrently. There is no implication here that the disciple first learns the Word of God and then when that learning is sufficient, application to the life begins. Jesus said to "abide" in His Word (John 8:31), the sign of a true disciple.

Putting into practice the injunctions of the Word of God is critical at the early stages of discipleship and apparently it must be taught. As a disciple lives out the Scriptures, the result will be a life that is in submission to the Lord.

Commitment to God. As Jesus discipled the Apostles, they grew in their faith in Him and their obedience to His commands. A desire to do God's will is the most basic quality to instill in the life of a disciple (Matt 26:39). Coupled with that longing is a wholehearted commitment to serve the Lord (Luke 14:27), loving the Lord more deeply than all others and exhibiting a willingness to die for Him (Matt 10:37; Mark 8:34-38). A desire to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness as exceeding all natural desires (Matt. 6:33; Mark 8:33) must be understood as a vital part of commitment to God. And a sense of urgency must be developed in serving God (Luke 9:62) which will show the priority of God's will in the life of the disciple.

A Changed Life. It is the Word of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit that effects change in the life of a disciple who is committed to God. As Jesus spent time with His disciples, He taught them that the essence of discipleship was that which was produced on the inside. As the disciple submits to the Lord the following Christlike characteristics, as specified in the Beatitudes, will be manifest: humility of spirit, sorrow for sinfulness, gentleness, desire for righteousness, purity of heart, mercy, and peacemaking (Matt 5:3-12).

In imitating His model of discipleship, the inculcation of character is to be stressed by the teacher above the development of skills. A godly character is formed through the disciple's obedience to the Scriptures and commitment to God. It is then manifest through relationship with others.

Obligation to One Another. The uniqueness of the disciples is their love for one another (John 13:35); the fulfillment of the law is seen in their love for their neighbor (Matt 22:39). A particular goal of discipleship is to assist the disciple in the development of this love so that it will manifest itself in a spirit of servanthood and humility (Matt 20:26-28; Mark 10:42-45), forgiveness (Matt 8:22), kindness and fairness (Matt 7:38-42), care of believers (John 21:17), and unity among the brethren (John 17:23).

Such training will help to instill in the disciple a strength to resist sin which would harm others: Adultery (Matt 5:27-32), injury of the spirit of others (Matt 5:22), and retribution (Matt 7:12). Contrary to the world's view, enemies are to be treated with love; those who are guilty of persecution should be prayed for (Matt 5:43-48).

THE MISSION OF DISCIPLESHIP

The making of disciples does not begin in the church, it begins in the world--among the nations. Evangelism is fundamental to the Great Commission. This is evidenced by the phrase *baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit* (Matt 28:19), which implies that those who will be discipled are first led to Christ. While it is true

that we must be discriminating in those we select to disciple, this verse seems to be teaching that we are not to rely on others to do the work of evangelism. Bearing fruit is a proof of discipleship (John 15:8) and a true disciple will develop a passion for the lost (Matt 18:12-13).

And in the discipleship process, regardless of the level of maturity that our disciples have reached, our work is not complete until we have taught them how to evangelize. Only then will they be able to make disciples--win the lost to Christ and teach them to obey His Word.

CONCLUSION

The goals of discipleship then are two: (1) a progressing toward spiritual maturity as evidenced by a disciple's commitment to the Lord, Christlike character, and love to others, and (2) an ability to evangelize and teach others. A three-year discipleship program would allow time for teaching, ministry experience, and spiritual growth. As the disciple continues in ministry after the period of intense discipleship ends, it is important to encourage their ongoing commitment to the Lord. The discipleship phases out, but the relationship continues. As with the Lord and His disciples when He coupled His command to make disciples with the promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).