

A Theology of Discipleship

Few tasks can be accomplished without a clear idea of the goal and the means of attaining that goal. In the case of discipleship, the goal is spirituality maturity. The Bible contains many passages that describe the characteristics of a mature believer, which Greg Scorgie systematized into a three-part model:

- Relational maturity – Connecting
 - Closer relationship with God (piety)
 - Greater capacity to enjoy healthy relationships with others (fellowship)
- Transformational maturity – Becoming
 - Increase in virtue and reduction in vice (holiness)
 - Having our inner wounds healed (deliverance)
- Vocational maturity – Doing
 - Discovering our calling (discernment)
 - Living out our calling (obedience)

Therefore, the *goal of discipleship is relational, transformational and vocational growth.*

The Bible further indicates that spiritual maturity is, paradoxically, both God's work and ours. That is, God alone can bring about spiritual maturity in a person. However, we can intentionally place ourselves before Him to be matured. His maturing touch cannot be stymied by human effort, but those who willingly and actively surrender to that touch tend to mature more quickly than those who attempt to resist or ignore it. This active surrender takes the form of those activities known as the spiritual disciplines, or the means of grace: Scripture, sermon, sacrament, service, fellowship, prayer, and similar practices. Therefore, *the means of discipleship are the spiritual disciplines.*



FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD IS TO BE ACHIEVED
PRECISELY AS ANY FRIENDSHIP IS ACHIEVED -
BY DOING THINGS TOGETHER. THE DEPTH
AND INTENSITY OF THE FRIENDSHIP WILL
DEPEND UPON VARIETY AND EXTENT OF THE
THINGS WE DO AND ENJOY TOGETHER.

Frank Laubach, *Letters by a Modern Mystic*

Orienting Principles

This discipleship ministry strategy is guided by several convictions about the nature of discipleship. An effective and godly discipleship program ought to be:

Spirit-led. God is the Great Discipler. He is already working in the congregation in many ways, through both formal programs and informal means. As with any ministry, it is vital to discern where God is already at work and to ensure that any structured activities are moving in step with that work, instead of seeking to achieve merely human goals.

Expected. Discipleship is not an optional extra for those who are especially keen in the faith, or something only for the beginning of the spiritual life; it is essential to the ongoing spiritual health of all believers.

Broad-spectrum. Genuine Christian maturity is evidenced in growth in three areas of life: relational (a closer relationship with God and a greater capacity to enjoy healthy relationships with others), transformational (increasing in virtue and reduction in vice as well as having one's inner wounds healed), and vocational (discerning our calling and living it out in humility). As a result, discipleship activities should not be one-sidedly cognitive, behavioral or affective, but rather blend all three of these modalities into a holistic approach.

Matrixed, not siloed. Like missions, discipleship is not one church program amongst others. Rather, it should permeate all other programs. It should be made clear that each ministry team member's growing in Jesus is of greater importance than their contribution to the ministry program (as valued as that is). This grace-focused leadership style the only way to move the team from working *for* Jesus to ministering *with* Jesus.

Measured. Spiritual growth is difficult to measure *accurately*, but it is possible to measure *adequately*, especially at the congregational level. Such periodic measurement provides visibility into the success of the program as a whole and can identify areas that need attention.



THE CHURCH EXISTS FOR NOTHING ELSE BUT TO DRAW MEN INTO CHRIST, TO MAKE THEM LITTLE CHRISTS. IF THEY ARE NOT DOING THAT, ALL THE CATHEDRALS, CLERGY, MISSIONS, SERMONS, EVEN THE BIBLE ITSELF, ARE SIMPLY A WASTE OF TIME.

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

A Two-Pronged Approach

The ultimate vision for this discipleship strategy is to establish two parallel activities that use differing modalities, one proactive and the other reactive.

Life Groups

This is a series of small groups/seminars/workshops on Sunday afternoons/evenings. Sundays were selected because modern society runs on a weekly cycle of busy weekdays and (slightly) more relaxed weekends. So meeting on Sunday evenings leaves weeknights free for other activities. The event would be divided into three one-hour sessions:

- 5:00-6:00 Session 1
- 6:00-7:00 A shared evening meal
- 7:00-8:00 Session 2

Different groups would usually be offered in the two sessions (i.e. depending on the person's interests, they might attend only session 1 or only session 2, or attend two different groups in sessions 1 and 2). Groups would meet for 13-week "semesters". There would be three semesters a year: Fall (Sept-Nov), Winter (Jan-Mar) and Spring (Apr-Jun).

While all sorts of groups could be offered, some foundational ones would include:

- Discovery – Alpha or some other seeker-oriented material
- Basic Christianity (for new believers) – This would cover two semesters:
 - Worldview training – work through the clauses of the Apostle's Creed
 - Spiritual life skills – training in several activities essential to spiritual health: spiritual friendship, journaling, scripture, prayer, and the Sunday service
- Life courses (for believers who aren't new) – Interdisciplinary surveys of real life topics, such as
 - Personal topics: Prayer, Suffering & Dying, Discernment, Conflict & Forgiveness
 - Ministry topics: Evangelism, Discipleship, Wealth & Poverty, Global Missions
 - Ministry context topics: The Church, The Home, The Marketplace, The Public Sphere
- The Bible Train (for everyone!) – A guided reading of the whole Bible over three years
- Teens – Following the Young Life model, an attractional event could be run on another night, while Sunday nights would host the deeper small group Bible study and fellowship time for students. Their participation in the shared evening meal and another group in the other session would be a valuable opportunity for cross-generational fellowship.

Sadly, life groups can devolve into a merely academic exercise, aping a seminary class without taking advantage of the unique growth potential of a church-based group. To avoid this, well-designed life groups will equip their participants in three ways:

- Cognitive – learning new information and ways of thinking



THE COMMAND TO FOLLOW REQUIRES THAT WE TAKE A DAILY JOURNEY IN THE COMPANY OF OTHER STUDENTS. IT DEMANDS THAT WE BE LIFELONG LEARNERS AND THAT WE COMMIT TO CONSTANT GROWTH IN SPIRITUAL MATURITY. DISCIPLESHIP IS A CALL TO ME, BUT IT IS A JOURNEY OF "WE."

Michael Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*

- Behavioral – acquiring practical skills and life-giving habits
- Affective – being motivated and encouraged

Learning how to craft such life groups will be a central part to the training for life group leaders.

To facilitate the participation of families with young children, care for young children would be provided during the two sessions (by different staff, so they could participate in the alternate session). Activities for older children would be scheduled during the two sessions as well. By solving the child-care problem, we remove a significant obstacle to participation for parents.

Breaking bread together is a powerful act of fellowship. Therefore, while the shared meal is a practical concession to the time of day, it has great intrinsic value. While it can be a challenge to plan a menu that is nutritious, inexpensive and allergy-safe, the benefits of a shared meal are worth the effort.

Soul Friends

When the Irish converted to Christianity, they quickly learned the importance of an *anamchara*, or soul-friend. Similarly John Wesley, one of the great founders of Evangelicalism, listed “Christian conversation” as one of the five great means of spiritual growth (the other four being: Scripture, sermon, sacrament and service). Therefore, the second part of the discipleship strategy is encouraging people to enter into intentional spiritual relationships. This might take several different forms:

- Hierarchical or flat
 - A more spiritually mature discipler could guide a less mature disciple, or
 - Spiritual peers could meet for mutual encouragement and admonishment
- One-on-one or a triad
- Varying frequency
 - Every day, once a month, or somewhere in between

In any case, the goal is not to cover a curriculum as is the case of Life Groups. Instead, soul friends always start with the same question: “How is it with your soul?” and go from there. Other ways of asking this question include:

- What’s the best thing that happened since we last met? Where is God in it? What’s the worst thing that happened since we last met? Where is God in it?
- What is hindering you from hearing God’s voice more clearly, or from responding to Him for consistently?

While Christian conversation is vital, soul friends should be encouraged to go beyond gathering to talk. Serving others together is a powerful way of developing and solidifying relationships, as well as an important outlet for and means of spiritual growth. For this reason, existing ministry teams might easily become greenhouses for soul friendships.

This activity would be more difficult to track and monitor than the more formal Life Groups as it is so organic. Therefore, this element of the discipleship program would act as a trellis, a structure where spiritual growth can occur naturally. But the goal would be to encourage as many people as possible to meet periodically with a soul friend. Formal aspects to this program might include: supervision sessions for those acting as mentors in more hierarchical relationships, teaching that demonstrates the characteristics of a healthy soul friendship, and a list of “known good” mentors to refer people to.

First Steps

In the first three to six months, I would undertake the following steps to begin the move to the vision described above:

- *Mobilize prayer for revival.* Begin praying for a spiritual renewal within the church, and identify and enlist the prayer warriors already in the church to join in this initiative. After all, prayer is not the preparation for the work of ministry; it *is* the work of ministry. Our activities are merely collecting the spoils.
- *Baseline the church's maturity.* Administer the REVEAL survey to establish a baseline for measuring the effectiveness of the discipleship programs to be established. Administer the survey again every two years to measure the church's progress in spiritual maturity and potentially alter the strategy if progress is not being made.
- *Survey existing discipleship activities.* Get to know what is already happening in the church, including both formal programs and informal gatherings. In addition to getting to know the people of the church better, this survey will be attentive for three things:
 - where the Holy Spirit is already work in the church (so we can get behind and push)
 - where human institutions have persisted long after God has left (so we can gently redirect the effort elsewhere)
 - the gaps that exist in the church's discipleship activities; no church can do everything, but are the gaps ones we are deliberately accepting?
- *Preach and teach a wider and deeper vision of the Christian life.* It is vital to show people that there is more to the Christian life than merely being saved and then "holding on 'til heaven." This is already underway in Fall 2014 with the Live Differently sermon series and the Spiritual Health seminar.
- *Develop a pool of disciplers.* Identify a body of potential disciplers and personally invite them to join in a discipleship training program and a supervised ministry of discipleship. Before you can encourage the church as a whole to get a soul friend, you need to make sure that you have enough on hand to help them!
- *Build a clearinghouse for discipleship resources.* While a church library is helpful, a curated list of resources – books, videos, study guides, Internet links, etc – with reviews and recommendations by trusted members of the church is more helpful still. This can be a short list that grows gradually over time, so it does not require a large investment of time or money up front.
- *Start meeting with soul friends.* I would meet regularly with a soul friend, as well as seek out a pair of triads to mentor.



THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THE
CHURCH THAT DISCIPLESHIP WILL NOT CURE.
NOTHING. WHEN YOU FIND PROBLEMS IN
THE CHURCH...IT IS ALWAYS A LACK OF
DISCIPLESHIP THAT LED TO IT.

Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence*