

MAKING NEW DISCIPLES - REACHING OUT TO OTHERS FOR CHRIST

B. Nurturing New Christians – Discipleship Repeats Itself

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (8)

One of the last commands Jesus gave His disciples was to go into all the world and make disciples of the nations. Not just casual believers, but people who would count the cost of commitment to Him who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me". This would involve leaving comfort zones; "going" to people; "baptizing them"; and "teaching them" how to be active disciples. The call was to be "like Christ" to the world and model His life for new disciples to imitate. You heard Him pray for future generations who would believe in Him. But where to start? As you look back over recent months, you think about the way Jesus worked with the first group of disciples. For three years you lived together under His influence and watchful eye. You ate together, travelled together, faced supporters and detractors and dealt with food and financial shortages as a group. Each new experience became a teaching opportunity for the Master. You learned things about God and His Kingdom on earth that remained mysteries to others, because Jesus took time out to explain and contextualize them. Some lessons were hard to learn. Others things didn't make sense at the time (but do so now, since His resurrection). Like sunshine, fertile soil and rain, the seed of God's Word spoken by Jesus fell on "good ground" and germinated in your heart. Being a disciple has involved significant personal sacrifices. It has meant going through great sorrows, ostracism and unexpected joys. You have gone to the foot of the cross and back again. For weeks after that the group waited until the Holy Spirit came down on the Day of Pentecost. Since then the concept of discipleship has broken down ethnic and linguistic barriers in a way that has been unparalleled in the history of religion. Christianity has started to embrace tribes and regions hitherto remote from the worship of the True God. Jesus has introduced a new reality, the realm of the Spirit. Law and regulation could never do this. The challenge now facing the early church is continuing His work. You compare notes and consider the enormity of the task. He has promised that you will all do "greater works" than Him. That seems staggering. His standards are high. The barriers are great. Can this band of followers teach the world His ways as effectively as He did? Can they hold together a fledgling faith against the backdrop of cynicism, unbelief, selfishness and religious pluralism? Over the centuries the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth would confront these issues on an ongoing basis. They would succeed, not because of the power and styles of leadership or the sheer force of theological argument, but because Jesus declared that He would build His church. You are privileged to be part of this work of transforming nations. It is time to start.

The Disciple's Mission is to make other disciples. God's children reach out to the world with His message of hope. This process will continue to bear fruit as long as new believers are carefully nurtured by older disciples.

The mandate

“Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Biblical discipleship involves helping new Christians to be like Christ. On the eve of his death Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the first disciples and for those who would become Christians through their witness: *“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message”*. Jesus interceded for you that night. Read the entire prayer, in John Chapter 17). That can mean people on the other side of the world, the other side of the street, or the other side of the office. People from every nation, every culture, every socio-economic condition can become like Jesus.

How did Jesus make disciples?

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles - that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter; James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.” (Mark 3:13-19)

Discipling is based on relationship. Jesus called the twelve to “follow” Him and to “be with Him”. Jesus knew that the best way to influence others by listening, modelling (example), instructing (teaching), facilitating fellowship, giving active support and honest feedback, keeping confidences, setting boundaries and keeping the goal in mind. Each of these was based on relationship.

Jesus used a similar analogy when He called the weak, the oppressed and the fatigued around Him to take his “yoke” and “learn” from Him. In New Testament times, it was common for farmers to hitch oxen in pairs to plough their fields. One of the beasts would be young, strong and energized. The other would be slower, less strong but seasoned. The young animal would provide the drive, the older the control and experience. Fellow-discipleship is like that.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus said, “I am calling you friends”. Master, yes, but mentor as well.

Disciple-making in the New Testament

The Apostle Paul used the same model:

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)

“You have heard me teach many things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Teach these great truths to trustworthy people who are able to pass them on to others.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

1. *Discipleship means teaching others*

Discipling others involves teaching others how to:

- live the Christian life (Acts 2:42-27)
- read the Bible, understand it and apply it in their lives, bearing in mind that each person learns differently (2 Timothy 3:14-17)
- pray for what really matters and listen to God (Luke 11:1)
- recognise and deal with temptation, discouragement, fear, sickness, and other personal struggles (Hebrews 3:13)
- be integrated with other Christians, in a local church (Acts 9:26, 27; 11:25)
- recognize and develop their God-given gifts and be motivated to use them to serve Him and others (1 Corinthians 12:1)
- be co-labourers in the task of worldwide evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20)
- re-align personal (including financial) priorities in line with God’s Word (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)
- deal with change and keep going when things get tough (Galatians 6 1, 2)
- reach out to others and repeat the process of discipleship (2 Timothy 2:2)

plus one that is often missing:

- count the cost of discipleship, take up their cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 8:44)

That teaching does not have to take place in a church building. It can occur in your home, workplace, over a meal, at the gym or on the golf course.

A word of warning. – avoid the “sheep dip” approach. In Australia, there are about 160 million sheep – give or take a few million to account for droughts. The only way to protect so many beasts against insects and fungicides is to push them through deep troughs in bulk. Hundreds, often thousands, of bleating, noisy, smelly sheep go through “dips”, where they virtually swim in chemical baths designed to eradicate disease. They all receive the same treatment. There is nothing individual about a sheep dip. This is a far cry from the New Testament model, where Jesus likened himself to a shepherd who knew his sheep and called them by name (John 10 14-16, 27, 28). There is a vast amount

of teaching and training material in the Christian world, but only individual training produces disciples.

2. *Discipleship requires forethought*

Jesus chose the original twelve disciples because He had specific things to say to them. By living with Him they could learn to the job His way, even if he were somehow removed from the picture (which He knew would be the case).

As a parent I come across adults who blame society (school, television, text books, teachers, other students) for the way their kids turn out. But, wait a minute they are the parents after all; they have the greatest influence in their children's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. It is a maxim in life that we must start with the end in mind. Christian communities likewise need to have a vision for the kind of disciples they are fostering. Someone has said that "If you aim for nothing you will hit it".

"Mentoring" is another word that springs to mind. Singapore's first Prime Minister remains in Cabinet as a titular "Minister Mentor", training members of the administration how to govern in line with his original vision. Successful people in business often start out with mentors, men or women who have "been there", know the way, anticipate and recognise the pitfalls, and understand leadership.

The original "Mentor" is a mythical character in Homer's poem "The Odyssey". When Odysseus, the King of Ithaca set out to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted responsibility for his kingdom to Mentor who, in turn, served as the teacher and overseer of his son, Telemachus.

The mentor is a coach. He or she is typically older and more experienced. The mentor helps and guides another person's personal or work development. The best kind of mentor knows how to undertake the task at hand, but does not try to do the job in lieu of the learner, or come across as imperious. The greatest reward for the mentor is when the learner knows how to do the job and he or she (the mentor) ends up "out of work".

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), used to say that missionaries were like scaffolding that could serve while the Christian community was being established but could be removed when the job was done.

Mentoring takes time. It involves patience, responsibility and mutual accountability, getting to know the other person, understanding their limits, looking out for them, being willing to give and take. Paul put it this way in a letter he wrote to the church in Thessalonica:

"... we were as gentle among you as a mother feeding and caring for her own children. We loved you so much that we gave you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too.

"... we treated each of you as a father treats his own children. We pleaded with you, encouraged you, and urged you to live your lives in a

way that God would consider worthy. For he called you into his Kingdom to share his glory.

“And we will never stop thanking God that when we preached his message to you, you didn't think of the words we spoke as being just our own. You accepted what we said as the very word of God - which, of course, it was. And this word continues to work in you who believe.” (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8, 11-13)

3. *Discipleship is growth, not just motion*

When we are Christians, the Holy Spirit comes along side of us, instructing, guiding, promoting, nudging and teaching us. This raises an important question: if the Holy Spirit is with us, and in us, why do we need other Christians at all? Wouldn't it be less complicated if faith could be a strictly personal affair and we didn't have to get involved with others. Some religions are like that. Follow the Master; adopt the teaching; let it soak in on a private basis. However, that's not the New Testament way.

The Christian life is more than a private apprenticeship. It is more than developing skills and achieving competencies. It is also about character and personality: imitating the person of Jesus and becoming like Him.

Discipleship involves following Jesus. He is Master. Without Him religion, conversion, faith, obedience, teaching, discipline, suffering, meditation, pilgrimage, ethics and values are worth nothing. (All they do is reflect social values and organizational expectations; they have no eternal meaning. In a post-modern world, where there are no absolutes, they have no intrinsic value.) Moreover, Christianity is also horizontally relational, to the rest of the community of God's people.

How do people learn? According to one estimate, 90% of Christian teaching occurs in literate (ie written) form. However, UNESCO data indicate two thirds of the world are oral communicators, in terms of the ways they learn and acquire knowledge. Hundreds of millions of people cannot read or write effectively. A pastor friend of mine is involved in outreach to Estonians and Russians who are deaf – and is expanding his interest to embrace the deaf of China. We need to be sensitive to the individual needs and situations of those we are seeking to help grow in discipleship.

Going to church and participating in programs do not, of themselves, make disciples. These are important activities, but they do not generate change or growth. In fact, they can lull people into the false belief that lots of head knowledge and activity are enough to produce maturity. Growth doesn't just happen. It is not produced by passing on facts, like tribal lore, family traditions being transmitted from one generation to another or a corpus of knowledge building up in the scientific community. Information is important (to obviate error) however it can also get in the way. Baptism or church membership alone don't

make a believer a disciple. Monasteries may be apt refuges for profound religious thinkers, but few people fit that category. Discipleship is not an acquired taste like chili or durians. It is a lifestyle of commitment and change.

4. *Discipleship means carefully cultivating others*

Before I married I bought five acres (2 hectares) of land on the edge of the city. I was going to be a part-time farmer – until I saw that cultivating a parcel this size without machinery was quite beyond me. After marrying, my wife and I struggled to grow fruit trees behind the house. We gave some of them with so much water they drowned. Keen to learn from our mistake, we left others so long they perished for lack of moisture; by the time help arrived it was too late. Next, I went to a shop and bought the most powerful fertilizer I could find. I heaped it up around the trunks of the trees and waited; the fertilizer burnt the trees and they died faster than their predecessors. We fried, froze, desiccated, poisoned and otherwise maltreated our botanical friends it is a wonder anything survived. So much for budding farmers.

I have likewise found we can flood new Christians with activity and knowledge; let them wither for lack of nourishment and instruction; crush them with zeal; burn them with legalism; and poison them by wrong input from our attitudes. Jesus cultivated every relationship, carefully and individually, on their basis of peoples' needs.

Let's look at this cultivation model from another perspective.

I have a good friend, Harry, who is one of the most effective pastors and missionaries I know. He has a big heart for God and people. The reason Harry gets closely involved with new Christians (and urges others to do likewise) is because he understands the law of cultivation. He knows there would be a public outcry if newborn babies in hospitals across the land were left to fend for themselves or be abandoned, undernourished, dying in vast numbers due to neglect. He laments that many churches neglect newborn Christians. Infants only grow with attention and loving care. The same applies in the Christian life.

5. *Discipleship means supporting one another*

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Nurturing disciples is not about being spiritually superior or telling people what to do (even though there are leadership structures appointed by Christ in the church to provide guidance, cf Hebrews 13:17). It is about running the race with them. You don't have to be a Super-Christian to be a good discipler of men and women. The Bible describes the Christian life as a race, with a finishing line and a prize. Jesus has gone before us. Since He knows the way, He goes with us.

The rest of the Christian community is available to work with us. We are never alone, but part of a world-wide network of the People of God.

Take Henry Wanyoike. Henry is a Kenyan marathon runner. What makes him different from other Kenyan marathon champions is that he is completely blind. In April 1995 Henry suffered a stroke and lost his sight (but not his vision! There is a world of difference). His dreams of being an athlete, that he had nurtured since childhood, initially appeared to have gone forever.

Some years later his doctor discovered that Henry had been a promising runner. With encouragement from his family and friends he developed an effective technique of running in unison with a guide connected to his wrist by a short rope; giving both runners freedom of movement but allowing them to maintain contact. Henry went on to win a place in the Kenyan Paralympics team. He ended up at the Sydney Paralympics in 2000, where he won the first gold medal, for an African, for the 5,000 metre run. Henry holds the world record for the 5,000 and 10,000 metre events for a blind runner. He gained gold medals for both distances in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. After finishing the 10km race in 30 minutes in the 2003 Nairobi Marathon, Henry was approached by the Standard Chartered Bank and appointed as their Goodwill Ambassador for the "Seeing is Believing" Global Campaign to work with industry to help restore peoples' sight.

How does Henry do it? First, by being a good runner and practicing regularly. Second by running with a companion. Without that friend he could not do it. He we would be lost in his dark world. A solo performance would end in disaster. Running together, they smash world records. Who gets the credit? Henry, of course. The friend is there to help, not draw attention to himself. He is a volunteer. It takes grace to do that. The theme song in the Standard Chartered Bank advertisement that features Henry is John Newton's classic "Amazing Grace". It takes grace to work with others for their benefit instead of ours.

6. *Discipleship means guiding those who stray*

Supporting one another implies being in a position to guide them through hard and unfamiliar times.

I am reminded of one occasion when I was driving through Turkey with my family. We thought we knew where we were going, so we decided to take a short-cut through a certain city. Easier said than done when you are not familiar with the terrain and don't speak Turkish. We ended up in a marketplace. It was Saturday morning and it seemed that every grower in the district was unloading his or her crates of fruit, vegetables and flowers and every craftsman was setting up stalls with carpets and handicrafts. Inching our way along, we came to a halt in a narrow street, wedged between two trucks, with wheelbarrows and a mountain of produce in front of our car. Behind us, the drivers of other trucks were impatiently sounding their horns. I hopped out of the vehicle and explained in my best hand signs that we were hopelessly lost. The crowd was impatient; people gesticulated rudely. I genuinely believe we brought the market to a halt.

It was very embarrassing. All eyes were on the car of foreigners out of their depth in a strange city.

Finally, out of nowhere came a man on a motor bike who asked where we wanted to go. Amid the chaos I explained our plight. He directed the trucks behind us to back up out of the way, helped grocers with barrows of goods to move them to one side and guided us as we gingerly reversed out of the chaos. The next thing he did was to signal that we should follow him. We did so, through side streets and alleyways, around tight corners and oncoming traffic. After what seemed an age, we realized he had brought us to junction with the road we were originally seeking. What a hero. We nearly kissed him. With a cheery wave he was gone. He didn't ask for thanks or a medal. He was just being a kind-hearted neighbour.

I recount this story because it reminds me of the help that Christians should be prepared to give to younger disciples who get caught up in the maze and feel trapped by circumstances. If we know the way out, it is our role to show the way.

7. *Discipleship is costly*

For some Christians, following Jesus comes with a big price tag. I have a friend who became a Christian in Baghdad during the murderous regime of the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. It was no easy task for his new Christian friends to prove they were not antagonistic Muslims masquerading as Christians simply to trick him. Gradually the level of trust built up. He knew people who were being executed by the Iraqi authorities, on the basis of false accusations levelled against them by baleful neighbours.

In many countries, conversion to Christianity is against the law. Imagine mentoring new Christians in such environments. When you consider the fog of the war in Iraq, the frightening statistics, the thousands killed and tens of thousands injured, the billions of dollars thrown away on the prosecution of a conflict that was largely constructed on lies and faulty assumptions, never forget that even such theatres of human tragedy there are Christian men and women attempting to live as "buddies" to new believers and encourage their growth in faith.

Re-made in the right image?

"Disciples making disciples" only works if we follow Jesus. The last thing the world needs is clones of us imitating our foibles. This is where extremist movements that operate out of an "enforcer mentality" come adrift. They stress compliance, submission and hyper-shepherding by exclusive leaderships, blind obedience and "covenant relationships" with narrow teaching structures. There is danger in believing we must be disciples of individuals in order to be followers of Christ. This is how error creeps into the Christian community.

Discipleship involves accountability, character development, networking and close relationships with Jesus and His people, but not authoritarian control,

spiritual abuse or notions that lack of compliance with leadership is egregious rebellion against God, as some teach (citing passages such as 1 Samuel 15:23 and 1 Samuel 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11). These are not normative in Christian living.

That's how great Christian congregations lapse into denominational myopia and stagnation. When people follow us because of our magnetic personalities, hobby horses, peer pressure or great music, or because we are meeting their physical, financial and emotional needs, this is not discipleship. In fact, it can end up bordering on unhealthy dependence or infatuation. Mega churches can be enormously effective in reaching the world with the Christian message, but if they are predicated on a charismatic leadership alone those who criticize them for mass psychology may be close to the mark. I am an advocate of mass evangelism and convention meetings, because they can harness massive human and financial resources, prayer support, musical and organizational talent and attention as no small congregation or individual can do, but they do not automatically contribute disciples. This takes planning.

Responding to the challenge

Open your heart to all that God wants to do through your life. Learn to be responsive to the things He wants to achieve in the lives of others; not because you are strong, depending on your own wisdom; or because you have good organization skills, systems, structures and programs, but because He is God and the Holy Spirit is in you. The Father heart of God wants to reach out through the likes of you to the billions who are without Christ and to bring them into active and ongoing relationship with Him.