

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

Forget Discipleship (make disciples)

Introduction

Discipleship is a popular subject in many church circles these days. There is a lot of talk about the subject, but not much real activity; and the activity which does take place can, at times, seem quite problematical.

We rejoice when we see evidence that people are growing in their faith – but a few people have stood out in every generation as shining examples of faith. A more important test is to look at the spiritual lives of the majority of the people attending our churches: do we see evidence of spiritual growth there? Do we see lives being changed? It seems the evidence is often hard to find – even in churches which are growing numerically.

I believe all these problems stem from one simple cause: we are approaching the subject from completely the wrong direction.

We are interested in discipleship. We want to set up programmes to teach and train people. But Jesus did not tell us to set up a Discipleship Programme: He told us in 'the Great Commission' (Matthew 28:16-20) to make disciples.

Details

What we do

When we consider the subject of discipleship, the conversation inevitably goes in a certain direction. Certain questions spring to mind.

- What do we need to teach?
- How much detail do we need to provide?
- What do we do about applying the training?
- When and where do we provide the training?
- Should we charge, and if so, how much?
- How do we recruit students? Do we select people to take part? Do we aim for a certain type of student? Do we make it open to everyone?

Typically, other questions do not spring to mind. They just get answered as we put the programme together.

- How important is it that the participants end up with the right theology (our theology, of course)?

- How prescriptive should we be about valid ways to apply the training?

The result, of course, is a course or programme which we set up. We recruit people to take part – sometimes young, enthusiastic Christians for whom discipleship is a new and exciting concept, sometimes older, experienced Christians who are looking for ‘something more’ in their Christian walk. But they are almost always Christians for whom the programme is an optional extra, something they commit to – for a short period of time – in addition to their commitment to Jesus.

The teaching is fairly structured and mostly Biblical, so the participants do gain from it. It is often the first systematic Christian teaching they have received, which itself can be quite an exciting revelation when it is done well.

Consequently, most of the time, everybody is very enthusiastic about this new venture; they feel the whole exercise was very worthwhile. But after a while, the students start to notice that the way they are living now is pretty much the same as the way they were living before the course. They learned a lot but ... so what?

The drawbacks

One assumption in all this is that we – the people running the programme – know what you should believe and how you should live. We are the experts, and the purpose of the programme is to enable us to pass on what we know to you people who need to learn. You don’t need to think about it for too long before you start to see one or two problems with this starting point.

And as for the practical details: it is obvious that setting up a discipleship course is a very tricky business – if we need to answer those questions listed above. It is hard to get two Christians to agree on the answers; it is even harder to get agreement on these points from all the Christians needed to produce and run the course, and the leaders who have to endorse it. Or so you would have thought. In reality, a multitude of discipleship courses exist. Over the years, I have taken part in many of these courses, and not taken part in many more.

Why so many? It appears that we don’t really mind too much about getting the right answers to these vital questions. Maybe this is because – despite the enthusiasm we have to bring to any new discipleship course – we don’t really believe that they will make much difference, so it doesn’t matter much what they cover.

Telling people how to live is deeply problematical. If you are unclear, the whole exercise is a farce – acting out the appearance of guidance while saying nothing helpful at all. On the other hand, if you are clear, then the whole thing easily becomes heavy, oppressive and spiritually unhealthy for both the leaders and the led.

And, if we are honest, we really don’t believe that the people running the programme know exactly what you should believe and how you should live. We feel the need to give clear guidance to young Christians, but we don’t fully believe the guidance we give.

Every way you look at it, the traditional approach to discipleship does not work. Do we have to forget about the subject? No: Jesus commands us to do it. Our familiar approach does not work but, fortunately, Jesus’ own words point us in a completely different direction.

What Jesus said

Jesus told us to go and make disciples of people from every nation.

He did not tell us to institute a discipleship programme, but to make disciples. These two things are completely different.

A discipleship programme is about attending something for a while. Being a disciple is about how you live.

Jesus told us three key things in this passage.

- He told us to **go and make** disciples. It is an intentional activity, not something that will ‘just happen’, and people do not become disciples through singing hymns, reciting creeds and listening to sermons.
- He told us to make **disciples, not just converts**. We usually aim to make converts, and hope that they will turn into disciples at some later stage, but this is not what Jesus told us to do.
- These disciples are to be **people from every nation**. Nobody is to be forgotten, nobody is to be left out or excluded. Anyone can become a disciple.

A few other points are clear from the text.

A disciple is **made by other disciples** – other learners. Jesus told His first disciples to make disciples. That makes sense: you can only reproduce what you are.

A disciple is **not perfect** – being a disciple is the start of a journey of faith, not a choice for the really keen, committed Christian. This point is underlined in the text: we are told something really important about the disciples He gave this command to – “some doubted”. You don’t have to be perfect to be a disciple, you don’t have to have arrived at some state of maturity – in fact, it’s important that you have not arrived, and you know it.

A disciple is **someone who keeps on learning** – someone who knows that they don’t know everything yet. The starting point of every journey is the recognition that you have not arrived yet. Disciples are learners. They have to believe in Jesus, but they also have to keep on learning who He is and how to follow Him. Discipleship is a life-long commitment, not a training course for new converts.

A disciple is **someone who obeys Jesus**. Jesus only says two things concerning the disciple-making process. Firstly, we are to be baptising the new disciples (the assumption is that the new disciples are new members of the community); secondly, we are to be “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”.

A disciple is **someone who is learning how to live and love** – not someone who is learning doctrine. Our discipleship programmes usually focus on the systematic teaching of doctrine, but Jesus tells us to focus on obedience to His commands – which means the focus must be on how we live. What did Jesus command us to do? Love your enemy, love God, love your neighbour, love yourself, love one another. Even the command to “remember me” was to be obeyed in the context of an activity – taking a meal together.

A disciple is **someone who recognises they need to change** – and is willing to allow Jesus to direct that change. Learning in the Bible is not primarily about academic teaching: it is about doing things and making mistakes, failing, and learning from your mistakes, ideally with a more experienced person to guide you to do better next time. Learning is more about life than it is about classrooms.

A disciple is **someone who trusts Jesus to shape them** – someone who wants to become the person Jesus wants to make them, someone who believes that who they are in Jesus is their true self. As I become more like Jesus, I become the person I was created to be. I discover who I really am, not by looking within me but by looking at Jesus.

A disciple is **someone in an active relationship with Jesus** – a disciple may be on a training course or studying for a qualification, but this is just a detail. Being a disciple is primarily about being in a relationship with Jesus and His family, and allowing that relationship to change you.

How this works out

It should be clear that teaching people to obey Jesus is completely different from the laid-back teaching (usually implicit rather than explicit) of many churches, where you learn from the Christians around you that God loves you no matter what, so how you live really doesn't matter – as long, of course, as you avoid the obvious public sins. And it is also very different from the rigid approach of those churches which teach people to obey their church leaders.

How do we put this kind of discipleship into practice?

Some people pick up on the idea of discipleship and turn it into a strictly hierarchical relationship, forgetting that the pyramids were left behind in Egypt. They sometimes justify their approach by Paul's instruction to the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

But Paul is not establishing a rigid pecking order here – I imitate Christ, you imitate me, someone else further down the line imitates you, and so on. Paul is telling them that He is seeking to imitate Christ, and they should do the same. Possibly, he is also putting sensible limits in place: only imitate me in so far as I am imitating Christ – don't imitate my mistakes and failures.

I am to follow Jesus, to learn from Him. But Jesus is alive and living in every one of His people, so I can learn something of Jesus – I should be able to learn something of Jesus – from every one of my Christian sisters and brothers.

There certainly should be things I can learn from those who are older and wiser in the faith than I, people whose characters have been shaped by faithfully following Jesus for decades. But not every old Christian is a mature Christian. And I can often learn more easily from people whose lives are more like my own, whose experiences and challenges I can relate to. And I can certainly learn from babies in Christ, for whom everything is still wonderful and new and amazing, and who are often given the most profound spiritual insights as they learn the tricky practice of living in a Kingdom which is now but not yet.

So we should recognise experience and wisdom, but we should also recognise the presence of Christ in all His Body, and listen to Him speak when His Spirit gives words, no matter who they are given through.

I am not going to tell you the one Right Way to do this: I may not be right, and I think that if you want to follow Jesus, He will probably tell you what you need to know, one way or another. But it seems to me that the early Methodists got a great deal right in this area: we may not wish to follow every detail of their example, but being open with some fellow believers and mutually accountable sounds like a good direction to explore. We should be wise in who we choose to trust, but trust is essential.

One way or another, I must make space for God to speak to me, in whichever way he chooses: through a church service or a sermon, through a book or song or podcast, through a wise and experienced Christian or a young and enthusiastic one. If I insist that God must speak directly to my heart, I will probably discover that He never says anything I do not want to hear, so I need to build relationships with Christians I can trust, people who I will really listen to.

Mentoring is one useful tool here. Mentors typically ask questions to check whether the other person has really thought things through, and seek to open doors to new knowledge which the other person can then discover for themselves. A mentor is not responsible for the other person or how they turn out, but they are responsible for making sure – as best they can – that the person they are mentoring understands the issues on which they are building their lives. Mentors will often illustrate principles by sharing experiences from their own lives.

But we need to go beyond simple mentoring. I need people to ask me questions, but I also need people who can expect me to give them honest answers – I need to be accountable for the way I use the gifts and resources God has entrusted to me. This does not mean that I have to find someone who will tell me what to do, or what my goals must be. ‘Accountability’ means precisely that – the giving of an honest and complete account, a statement of what I have done.

We have to be accountable because we all have a deep capacity to fool ourselves, to hide important things from ourselves because they are too difficult or too painful or too inconvenient. And we all of us grow up with false beliefs and assumptions which we never question because we know them to be true.

All the time I can just act on what I know to be true, my beliefs and assumptions will remain unchallenged. It is only when I have to talk about what I did and why, when I am asked to articulate my reasons, that I discover other people – good people, who I trust – do not always share my certainty about these things. And this opens up the possibility of deep change.

We do not easily or quickly unlearn beliefs or behaviours which have helped shape our lives for years, but there is no need for the process to be quick (falling quickly into another mistaken assumption or dubious practice is rarely a good step) and the Bible does not promise that the journey will be easy. We are being formed into the image of Christ, and this process will take a lifetime. What matters is that we are walking the path marked out for us.

The practice of reflection and accountability in the context of open and trusting relationships will not change us overnight, but it is the ground in which the seed of God's word can grow and, in time, bear fruit.

Discipleship and church leadership

What does this mean for the church leadership? If they are not here to tell us how to live, what is left for them to do?

Actually, quite a lot.

There are three basic things the church leader has to do.

- The church leader has to **model discipleship**. If you are not willing to change, why expect your congregation to be willing? More importantly, change is scary and difficult: people need a role model to follow. You need to be learning, and the congregation needs to see that you are learning.
- The church leader has to **provide learning opportunities** – primarily in the context of on-the-job training, just as Jesus did it. By doing things, we learn what works and what doesn't, what is appreciated and what resented, what we are capable of and what is (currently) beyond us, what we can do when we work together and what we need God to do.
- The church leader has to **guide and encourage the disciples** – help them to learn, help them decide when to persevere and when to change course, help them to keep hold of the big picture while they invest time and energy in loving one person at a time, help them to understand how the Biblical truths are lived, applied and worked out in the messy details of real life. We learn mainly through what we do, but we learn best when this is combined with opportunities for structured reflection.

For many church leaders, this is a challenging prospect. It runs directly contrary to almost all the ministerial training they have received and contrary to the culture of most churches.

If the church leader does not model discipleship for the congregation, then they model something else. If the leader is (or the leaders are) not seen to be learning, then the leader will be seen to have learnt, to have done their learning in the past. It reinforces the expectation that you go and do some learning, then you graduate to demonstrate that you have learned successfully, and then all you have to do is to put your learning into practice and tell other people what you have learnt.

If the church leader does not model discipleship for the congregation, the congregation will be aiming – if they are aiming for anything – to get to the point where, like their church leader, they don't need to learn anything that matters any more. And this is a dangerous goal for anyone to have.

So, in order to model discipleship, you have to be seen to be learning – which means you have to be seen to be making mistakes and learning from them. This is very hard for most church leaders, and even harder for most congregations: they tend to like the idea in theory, but in practice are likely to punish the leader for any perceived weakness or failure. Churches often need help to negotiate their way through this tricky change in their culture and practice.

Success

One final thought: what does success look like? What are we aiming for?

If you build a discipleship programme, then success probably looks like having many people on your programme. After a while, you may even find you need to create a phase 2 of your programme to cater for the needs of the people who have completed phase 1 but still want something more: this will help even more people feel that they are growing, and help you to feel even more successful because even more people will be taking part.

On the other hand, if you seek to make disciples, then success is when you help people grow to become mature followers of Jesus, who know how to keep on learning. They will need you less and less, until they don't need you at all.

The thought of not being needed is both the joy and the anguish of every devoted parent. You work for, yet fear the day when your children don't need you, as that will feel like the end of a precious relationship.

But the end of being needed opens up the possibility of your relationship growing into something else – a friendship with an adult who you like, trust and respect, with whom you have the bonds formed by a lifetime of care; not just the memories of a childhood, but also the shared challenges of exploring adult life.

Much the same transition is possible for the church leader who aims to grow disciples.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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