

What is Discipleship?

Discipleship is a significant part of the Gospel message. The Great Commission recorded in Matthew's gospel states "Go therefore and *make disciples* of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.*" (Matt. 28:19,20) This command to make disciples is more than bringing people to a confession of faith. It involves bringing them to maturity as full participants in all of the commandments and teachings of Jesus. To do less is to minimize the Great Commission. It is therefore important that we understand what discipleship is, and how one makes another into a disciple.

Disciples are not self made. That is why Jesus told His disciples to make disciples of the nations. It takes a disciple to make a disciple. Discipleship as "other-training" is more effective than "self-training". It allows for a more objective assessment of the trainee than mere self-reflection or comparison to others. It also insures that all of the necessary components of the discipline are included. The temptation to take short-cuts is too great when self-instruction is undertaken.

In a very real sense, discipleship in Christianity is a process similar to development in psychology, socialization in sociology, or enculturation in anthropology. It is a guided experience into maturity under the supervision of parents and community. Biblical discipleship is the development of a Spirit-born Christian by one or more parental trainer and the community of faith. It is a process whereby the more experienced Christians assist the growth of new Christians so that they become effective, mature, and healthy believers. Without serious discipleship, the church becomes an organization of retarded believers in need of care-takers, or worse, a group of adolescents pretending to be adults without any real life experience.

Discipleship then, is an important part of the work of the Christian community and must take place at the individual, family, and congregational levels. And the purpose of this newsletter is to assist those who are seeking to be a disciple, or to disciple others. Each issue will address one or more areas of discipleship concern and will approach the discipleship contexts of the individual, family, congregation, and leadership.

Discipleship as Self Discipline

On the individual level, discipleship is a growth experience. Under the guidance of trusted teachers and a caring community of faith, the Christian is taught the knowledge, skills and values necessary to be a productive and mature member of the body of Christ. And one of the important skills of a disciple is self-discipline. Without it, productivity and effectiveness in community life and ministry will be limited.

Self-discipline, however, is difficult to accomplish. But the struggle is worth it. A Christian with self-discipline will be able to resist temptation and focus on those things that bring honor and glory to the Lord.

Paul was speaking of this great Christian strength when he spoke to his disciple Timothy. "Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work." (2 Tim. 2:20,21)

A disciple who has all of the knowledge, values, and skills to minister but is lacking in self-discipline will fall to temptation, and be too easily compromised, to do all he could otherwise do. In fact, self-discipline is part of the fruit of the Spirit which is characteristic of a mature Spirit-filled believer.

So how does one acquire this skill? It is developed as an outgrowth of the struggle to obey the Lord's commands. As a disciple learns to be holy (separated to God) and good (benefiting others) by following the commandments and teachings of the Lord, the obedience to the Word and the work of the Spirit combine to

bring this self discipline to maturity. Therefore, maturity as a disciple comes out of practical application of God's Word and experience that comes from being a doer of the Word.

Discipleship in the Family

The family has always been the foundational institution of every culture and society. This was true, without exception, until the present situation in America. Our nation is attempting to make "the individual" the foundation of the society and, as a result, the family has been de-emphasized. Other social institutions, including the government, have begun to fill much of the traditional roles of the family. Even the definition of family is being hotly debated in our present political and social context.

For Judaism and Christianity, the family remains the most important social institution. This is, in part, because the Scriptures make use, to a great extent, of family structure and imagery to express, teach and reinforce Biblical Truth. The family roles of the Bible are pictures of the relationship of God to Israel, Christ and the Church, and believer in relationship to believer.

But the primary purpose of the family is to provide a cluster of relationships that have direct developmental influence on the members of the family through roles and mutual love and care. From birth, our family is our primary context of learning to be human, to be a son or daughter, mother or father, brother or sister, Christian or Jew, etc. Therefore, the proper function and health of the family is of prime importance.

It is necessary, then, for believers to address issues that directly effect Christian marriage and family for the purpose of assisting to make our families a spiritual, healthy and effective context for discipleship. The guiding assumption of this notion is that the family is the primary place of discipleship, not the church. And that the family, not the individual, is the minimal unit of the Christian congregation. This makes the congregation an extension of the family rather than a gathering of individual Christians.

Lone Rangers for Jesus

One serious problem of American Christianity is the tendency for us to see the Christian faith as primarily an individual faith. "My faith", "my salvation", "my Lord" seem to dominate our speech and reveal a notion of individualism that is so common to American culture. But Christianity is not about being a "lone ranger" for Jesus.

Christianity is a "one another faith". It places us into relationship with God and fellow believers, and requires that we love, forgive, admonish, give to, and strengthen one another. In reality, God had made it impossible to be a Christian alone. Our faith operates in community. Family and congregational roles are primary to our faith growth, walk, and ministry. Doing good to and for others is foundational to Biblical ethics.

And discipleship is a community process as well. The Great Commission requires that we make disciples of others by teaching them to observe all the commands taught by Jesus (Matt. 28: 18-20). This does not allow that one can be self-taught to become a disciple by using a Bible and a workbook. No, to become a mature believer, one must be in regular contact with other believers struggling with the knowledge, skills, and values that are characteristic of Christians as commanded by Jesus. The primary relationships of discipleship include the family and the congregation. But too often, families and churches in American Christianity are sorely lacking in discipleship skills. So we must re-establish Biblical discipleship into our family and congregational institutions. This, in part is the purpose of this newsletter, to assist in re-establishing Biblical family and congregational discipleship.

Pastor: Evangelist or Discipler

The role of pastor in churches today is very different from that of pastor in the primitive church. Today's pastor is a professional, counselor, CEO, teacher, and fundraiser. The pastor of New Testament times was a religious community elder who served the congregation by training and equipping members of the community of faith in their family and congregational roles and ministries. In some cases, the Biblical role of pastor has been completely removed from the activities and job description of modern clergy. The result is that the important role of discipleship has been neglected or changed into a program of the church.

There is a need to return to the equipping pastor who, having demonstrated in his own family and life a mature and consistent walk with God, now instructs others to follow his example. This type of pastor is relational rather than program oriented and sees his primary responsibility as a discipleship minister rather than an evangelist. In

fact, the pastor is a shepherd who cares for sheep rather than a producer of sheep. And a pastor who brings his sheep to maturity will find that mature sheep reproduce sheep at a higher rate than he can do alone.

This pastoral model requires a mature and skilled pastor. One who has first been discipled, has discipled his own family, and now can effectively teach others the knowledge, skills, and values of our faith. If this type of pastor is missing from the congregation, we risk the danger of Christian babies having babies. We have seen, in the case of contemporary families, that this is a disaster and results in developmental retardation in the next generation. In fact, one can see a retardation of Christian maturity as a result of the replacement of pastors with evangelists in our pulpits.

In the present context of a post-Christian America, we must have pastors who can bring Christians to maturity in faith and ministry. We must be less dependent on the knowledge and charisma of the pastor and more a product of his discipleship in order that the congregation can be full of effective and mature believers. Without these discipling ministers, the immature in the church will become more and more subject to the wolves who seek to devour them.