



MARGINALIA

“Discipleship Déjà vu”

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Where have I heard this discipleship theme before? My bookshelves remind me why this all seems so familiar. *The Training of the Twelve*, by AB Bruce, is a classic from 1871. Closer to our time, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* by Leroy Eims was popular in the 1970s. Things really kicked off in the 1980s with the *Discipleship Journal* of NavPress. Other discipleship books from the 1980s include Win and Charles Arn's *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples*, Robert Coleman's *The Master Plan of Discipleship* and Bill Hull's discipleship trifecta (*Jesus Christ Disciple Maker*, *The Disciple Making Pastor* and *The Disciple Making Church*). In the 1990s there was SonLife's *Growing a Healthy Church* training. And just this past May 2010, the underlying theme of the Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Consultation was “making disciples of every people in our generation.”

This, of course, is but a small sampling from my personal interaction with this theme over the last three decades. Over and over Evangelicals emphasize that in order to grow believers and churches spiritually and numerically, we need to get serious about discipleship—about training others who will train others, etc. And over and over it seems we fail to learn the lesson. With each new decade come new discipleship gurus with new models for changing times. Some of the most recent are highlighted in the previous pages. This all begs the question: Why aren't we getting it?

It appears to me that our present “ministry system” (for lack of a better phrase) doesn't easily accommodate discipleship practices (this is also true for evangelism, without which there is nobody to disciple). In other words, the problem is as much systemic as it is personal. Many

of us do want to be disciplers, but find we are locked in a system that discourages it. Breaking free of this “ministry system” is possible, but it comes at a price. Forgive me for focusing on those of us in ministry, but if discipleship doesn't happen in our context, it is doubtful that it will happen elsewhere.

Let me illustrate the problem with the ministry system. I am writing this sentence at 11:44pm on a Tuesday evening. Why? Well, perhaps if I was more disciplined or better at time management, I would be in bed by now. Fair enough. But it may also be true, as it is for many people in ministry today, that we are juggling too many duties to prioritize the very time-consuming process of raising spiritual sons or daughters in the faith. Our days are filled with meetings, ministry, deadlines and problems, and we are often found at home in the evenings buried in email and projects that never saw the light of day during office hours. The “ministry system” evaluates me by what I do, not whom I disciple. And did I mention that I have a family?

In Robby Butler's excellent article, he says,

Amidst our other work or ministry involvements we must learn from and follow Jesus' example to be intentional in bringing others along, enlisting and coaching them to become disciplers who, amidst their own work or ministry, will also enlist and coach others.

Now that is a very tall order for those who can find no “amidst” to work with. Discipling takes time—time we don't feel that we have, time that will be evaluated by other criteria.

This system is not just a job description or a set of expectations. It is, in my perception, part of an Evangelical culture where the emphasis is on getting things done. While youth pastors may be allowed to

“just hang out” with teenagers, many in ministry find it difficult to disciple others. There is always something else to do. The same is true for missionaries.

The logic of discipleship is irrefutable. Deep down we know that it is the right thing to do. But the inertia of the “ministry system” which many of us are in is going in another direction. The only way out for many of us is something systemic, something that changes the system itself. I am sure that there are churches and ministries that have done just that, but I am not aware of many of them.

I recently heard of a YWAM base that has now required all of its members to spend two hours a day in prayer. That is what I call a systemic change. It doesn't leave conformity up to individual conviction or conscience. It is mandated organization-wide. Now imagine what would happen if ministries around the world mandated such a thing with regard to discipleship. Most ministries mandate something, but it is rarely discipleship. It is usually things like prayer, quiet time, accountability and meetings. These are good, but can tend toward an inward, cloistered lifestyle. Many ministry systems could use a complimentary outward focus on discipling others.

Perhaps this column is offering a poor excuse for why so many in ministry are not personally involved in making disciples. It could be argued that, regardless of the system, we should feel compelled to make disciples and we should find a way to “make it happen.” I accept the rebuke. At the same time, I see nothing wrong with making obedience a little easier. Those who are ministry leaders should take a long look at systemic changes that might need to be made in their organization to make disciple-making more common. If we don't, we can expect more books on discipleship right around the corner. 🌐