

DEMYSTIFYING DISCIPLESHIP

Finding a More Biblical Model for the Multiplication of Disciples and Churches



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Jesus' final commandment to His followers was to "Go and make disciples of all nations. . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20) His mandate is just as urgent now as it was 2000 years ago. With almost one-third of the world's population and thousands of people groups still without viable access to the gospel message, we need to "be the church" in a way that will effectively train disciples to make and train more disciples in an exponentially growing movement of discipleship and rapidly-multiplying churches. The New Testament gives us a successful model for carrying out this equipping process, but one that is rarely utilized in our Western church paradigm.

What would an honest evaluation of our churches, mission teams, and church-planting projects show? Are we focusing on the kind of individual and corporate preparation necessary to see a growing discipleship movement? Are we using successful biblical models? Unfortunately, our typical method of discipleship tends to be primarily idea-based, and focused on passively listening to sermons, classroom instruction and reading, with very little practical hands-on instruction and life application in discipleship and church-planting. Mentoring for ministry seems almost non-existent in our churches. Further, have we exported our failed Western models where churches rarely reproduce themselves to our cross-cultural church plants? Perhaps we've done a little bit better overseas, thanks to the multiplication church-planting models to which we've been exposed,¹ but a healthy self-examination in our mission practices would be worthwhile, as well.

If we want to see disciples making disciples and rapidly multiplying churches both at home and abroad, we need to readjust our discipleship and ministry training paradigms accordingly. Hopefully by eliminating some common false concepts and myths about the equipping process and looking at some simple biblical models, we can more successfully produce obedient followers, raise up new leaders and missionaries, and experience greater multiplication of disciples and churches.

FOUR COMMON MYTHS ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP AND EQUIPPING:

Myth #1: The task of discipleship is only for leaders and other mature and qualified people.

Nothing could be further from the truth! The idea that only certain high-level individuals should be developing others is one of the most insidious ministry myths to creep into

our churches and missions. We all need to be actively engaged in discipleship and there is no pre-qualification period. Some of Jesus' most recent followers began to share what He had done and immediately engendered more followers (for example, the Gadarene demoniac, the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind). During His years of earthly ministry, Jesus maintained a primary focus on making disciples and teaching them to make disciples. (We'll look more closely at how He did it in section 3.)

Paul, too, entrusted the work of spreading the gospel to new believers. In many of the cities he visited, he left handfuls of converts and was confident that multiplying churches would be left behind. Like Jesus, he also utilized a layered discipleship process: *"The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."* (2 Tim. 2:2) Each one that he trained was expected to train others, who would in turn be prepared to go out and teach.

Simply put, discipleship and multiplication are primary tasks of the church and all of its members. Rapid and sustained equipping of others is all the more imperative in the frontier mission context where human resources (i.e., experienced leaders) are limited and the need for a rapid spread of the gospel is high. We *must* adopt an approach both at home and abroad that will produce disciples and cross-cultural missionaries with a multiplication mindset. Our traditional Western hierarchical teaching model is just not up to the task.

Putting it into practice:

The t-shirt motto comes to mind: "Just do it!" Prayerfully look around you for those who would like to grow alongside you. Are you reaching out to unbelievers? Are you continually reaching a hand back to newer, younger believers, as well as a hand forward to more mature and experienced ministers? Are you motivating others to reproduce? If you are part of a church-planting or outreach team, take some time to examine your methods and

model. Do they include a plan for multiplying leaders who will in turn be multipliers? Recent issues of *Mission Frontiers* have included a number of viable options such as the T4T Process and the Discovery Bible Study Method from which you can draw as you learn to make disciples and train others to make disciples as well.

Myth #2: I need to have specialized training before I can begin the complex process of equipping others.

Books too numerous to count have been written on discipleship, mentoring, and leadership development. Many offer excellent models and practical pointers. However, the plethora of teachings often cause us average folks to think of equipping others as a complicated process to be handled by a cadre of educated specialists. Reading and studying can certainly be beneficial, but we can start right now by adopting Paul's two-point model of discipleship: *"Imitate me as I imitate Christ."*

Paul, arguably history's greatest cross-cultural missionary and biblical teacher, focused on multiplication through modeling. He multiplied followers; he multiplied leaders (and taught them to multiply); and he multiplied churches. His model was a simple one. He urged his followers to follow his example and in turn be examples to others in *their* lifestyle, ministry, and teachings.

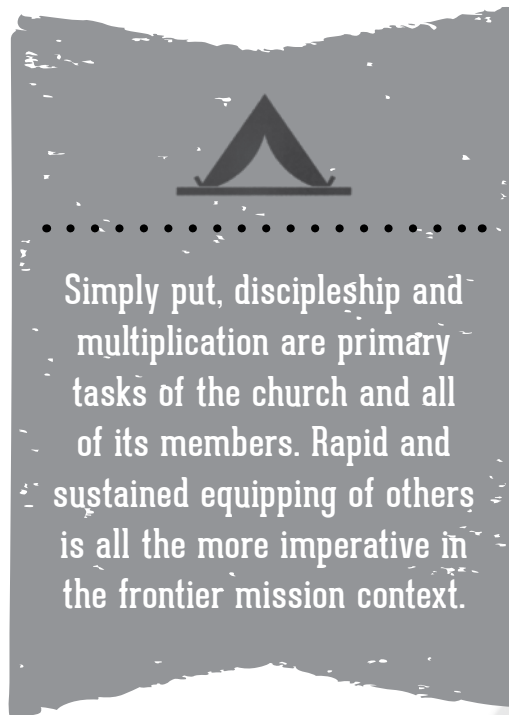
- *"Imitate me."* (1 Cor. 4:16)
- *"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."* (1 Cor. 11:1)
- *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."* (1 Tim. 4:12)

Granted, it's a bit intimidating to compare ourselves to Paul.

Nevertheless, just as we can look to Paul's character, intimacy with God, passion, power, and influence as goals to strive toward, we, too, can impart to others what God has taught and imparted to us. *"Freely you have received; freely give."* (Matt. 10:8)

Putting it into practice:

By all means, read some books on discipleship, mission strategies, and ministry development as mentioned above, but begin by immersing yourself in biblical models. Start by re-reading the life of Jesus, paying



attention to how He interacted with His disciples. Move on to the travels and writings of Paul. All of us can strive to live examples of Christ-like lives and encourage others around us to do the same. Be transparent about your shortfalls and keep yourselves mutually accountable.

Myth #3: Christian growth occurs primarily through listening to good sermons and participating in Bible studies.

The primary teaching mode of most Western churches is through a knowledge-based didactic paradigm. Of course a solid foundation of biblical understanding is essential for both personal growth and outreach. I am extremely grateful for the excellent theological instruction I've received through my church, its biblical study program, as well as through formal mission training. However, passive learning from church pew and classroom Bible study alone will not prepare us to actively engage in fruitful ministry.

John Maxwell in *Mentoring 101*² reminds us that we remember only 10 percent of what we hear, but we'll remember 90 percent of what we hear, see, say and do. (This statistic might be a little frightening to preachers and teachers!) As active disciplers, we need to ensure that what we teach results in understanding, recall at a better rate than 10%, and effective life application—that neither we nor those we train are just hearers of the Word, but “doers” (Jas. 1:22).

What are ways that we can teach people to “do” ministry? A look at Jesus' “School of Ministry” will give us insight into key elements for successful multiplication. When He chose His disciples, they were completely untrained and uneducated, but at the end of their time together they were a world-changing force that shook nations and kingdoms. What were specific ways that He prepared them for the tasks and challenges that would follow His death and resurrection?

a) Jesus spent considerable “face-to-face” time with His disciples. In fact, they were together almost 24/7 for three years. He modeled godly character in a wide array of circumstances, while at the same time giving

them input (both encouragement and rebukes) as they reacted to the happenings of the day: hunger, exhaustion, excitement, griping, comparing, fear, doubt, and so on.

b) The disciples had the benefit of hearing Jesus' excellent instruction (the equivalent to today's sermons and teachings) to the crowds, but He also spent time giving them private explanations of some of the more challenging teachings. This allowed for questions and discussions on a more intimate level, and specific emphases on what they needed to hear as individuals and as a group.

c) Jesus modeled ministry to them: preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and performing miracles. Then, he gave them detailed instructions and sent them out to put it into practice. He did this first with His inner circle (Matt. 10), and then with the seventy (Luke 10). The passage

in Luke also shows how He debriefed them on their return, with further instruction and correction.

d) Finally, Jesus commissioned them to start their own ministry (Matthew 28, Acts 1), but promised that He wouldn't abandon them, but would still be available to help them.

Maxwell summarizes the method in a simple five-step process: modeling (the learner watches the teacher); mentoring (the teacher explains the task and the learner assists); monitoring (the learner performs the task, but the teacher assists and corrects); motivating (the learner performs on his own, with encouragement and help as needed); and multiplying (the learner now becomes a teacher, training others to complete the task).

Putting it into practice:

Think about the skills you'd like to replicate in others. What will help them to grow, reproduce, and become effective ministers of the gospel? Prayerfully consider who demonstrates a desire to grow and serve. Gather a few folks around you and then put into practice the “show and tell” model outlined above. Make sure that everything you do is imitable and place yourself in the background shadows just as quickly as possible. Monitor,





encourage, and make sure they are soon training others. You should be equipping multiple successors for every aspect of what you do.

Don't forget that shared living is also key to helping others mature. Few of us will spend 24/7 with our disciples like Jesus did, but it is important that we spend significant time together in a variety of settings. Activities such as playing basketball, cooking, a family picnic, or travelling together for an event will open doors for deeper sharing and transparency. None of us will be able to model character perfectly, but our own struggles and flaws will open doors for discussion and prayer if we are willing to be open and mutually accountable.

Myth #4: If I have been faithful to make disciples, I've done my job.

The task of discipleship is never “finished.” We don't retire or disengage from the commands and commission of Christ. We may experience an ebb and flow of who the Lord places in our lives for a season. Some we have invested in will move on and God will bring others into our path; and we are told to go out in the streets and “compel them to come in.” (Luke 14:23) It's fascinating to study the ministry of Paul and the individuals that came alongside him in his travels to learn and serve. Some stayed behind to help build up the newer believers in the cities where they had travelled. Other workers joined the entourage or visited Paul in other places. Wherever he went, Paul focused on making disciples and forming leaders.

We need to also remember that our discipleship is only successful to the degree that those we have trained are in turn multiplying and reproducing. Keep this end goal in plain sight from the beginning of any relationship.


Putting it into practice:

In writing this article, I've realized that it's time for me to once again expand my discipleship role. Many of the young ladies I've mentored have “graduated” into their own ministry roles; several are beautifully discipling and mentoring others; some have far surpassed me in their kingdom influence. (This is a *good* thing, by the way.) While we continue to interact in mutual accountability, I know it's time for new discipleship relationships. What

about you? Take a few moments and write down whom you are involved with at the moment. Are you engaged with any unbelievers? Is it time for expansion? Here are some practical steps we can take together:

- Make yourself available to the Lord, staying alert to His Spirit as He brings people across your path.
- Look around you and reach out to newer people in your church—offer friendship and hospitality as a way of building relationship.
- Talk with the leadership in your church or mission; make them aware that you'd like to serve by discipling others, and get their input. (Be careful, though, if they are stuck in an old-school paradigm.)
- Find avenues of engagement in your wider community. Sometimes we are so involved with the church that we don't even know any non-Christians.
- May I specifically encourage you to look around for people that might be interested in a full-time mission career? The need is so great and the workers are few! If you have no idea how to start, my own book *To Timbuktu and Beyond: A Guide to Getting Started in Missions* will give you plenty of real-life tools.

CONCLUSION

The Bible gives a strong mandate for discipleship and multiplication, and richly provides us with examples and models for doing so effectively. Unfortunately, our entrenched Western paradigms have slowed us down with knowledge-based training and limited life application. If we are willing to step out in faith and obedience, utilizing biblical patterns for reproduction, we'll experience the rich reward of being apart of others' development, and a more rapid spread of the kingdom, while at the same time enjoying greater growth and maturity in our own lives. So let's follow the Nike model and “Just do it!” 

¹ George Patterson's pioneering work on multiplying churches may be found on-line in a variety of formats, or in *Church Multiplication Guide: The Miracle of Church Reproduction*, Patterson and Scoggins, William Carey Library, Revised edition, August 2003.

² *Mentoring 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know*, by John C. Maxwell (2008, Thomas Nelson Publishers).