

Why Obedience and Relational Discipleship Need to Be Friends

“Accountability feels legalistic to me. I like a discipleship model that is more relational.” These words were spoken by a friend. I had just brought up the suggestion that we ask application questions at the end of our Bible study. Her concerns were valid and real. They were not new to me.

Indeed for some, we almost have an aversion to anything that remotely smells like legalism or control. We may have had bad experiences with these things in our lives. Perhaps we’ve been wounded by controlling, authoritarian leadership. Or it may be that we come from an egalitarian worldview, where freedom of individual choice and tolerance are highly valued. That can also cause us to feel uncomfortable with regularly being asked about the application of God’s Word in our lives.

Some cultures (and some personalities as well) are more comfortable with accountability than others. For numerous people, the strong emphasis in Disciple Making Movements (DMMs) on obedience-based discipleship can feel extreme. It can seem like there is no priority placed on the relationship. They perceive this as legalistic and overly structured.

So, is it? Why does accountability matter in the process of launching a movement? Is obedience-based discipleship truly a necessary key to seeing a movement of Jesus followers begin to multiply? And does this emphasis on obedience indicate that the relational aspects of discipleship take a back seat?

In this article, I hope to answer some of those questions.

Obedience-Based Doesn't Mean It's Not Relational

In the movements I’ve watched emerge, both in our own training network and in others, I have seen that obedience-based discipleship is indeed a crucial factor in the movement’s rapid growth. But this doesn’t at all mean it happens without deep and strong relationships. Laying a foundation of obedience at the core of the movement need not become legalistic or controlling. Not any more than in any church structure. Jesus perfectly modeled for us how obedience and relationship go hand in hand in making disciple-makers. As we look to His example, we can discover how to do this well.

It Felt Uncomfortable

When we first began to experiment with using T4T (Training for Trainers) in South Asia, our team decided to start a T4T group in our home. Those of us on the team who hoped to eventually multiply T4T groups joined this initial group. It seemed like a good idea. Do first, then teach, right? I had no idea how much it would personally challenge my own faith and missionary lifestyle.

We followed the three-part system of T4T (Look Back - Look Up - Look Forward). We started our group meeting with pastoral care, then moved into a short time of worship. After this, we asked accountability questions of one another. How are we doing at following Jesus and fishing for men? We went around the circle and each person shared how they had done at applying what they had learned the prior week in their personal lives. Then we shared how we had done with our personal evangelism goals and activity

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that week. Had we prayed for anyone who was sick? Had we shared with someone our testimony or the story we had learned? (Check out dmmsfrontiermissions.com for free resources on how to start a T4T group).

I have to say, I wasn't used to being accountable to anyone for my weekly evangelism! It was not comfortable. I didn't like to have to admit that a whole week had gone by and I hadn't shared the gospel with anyone. Here I was, a missionary and a church planter, but I hadn't done what I was expecting of the others I was training. No, it definitely wasn't comfortable.

We continued on through the process of the three parts. We learned a new story or studied a new Bible passage. We then discussed four or five questions. The final question was "What will you do to obey?"

After answering that, we entered the final segment of our time together. We set goals for the coming week. We prayed for one another and sent each other out to do what God had spoken to us about in the study. I knew that the next week, the question would come around again. Had I applied the lesson in my own life (following Jesus)? Had I shared the gospel with anyone (fishing for men)?

This both motivated and scared me. I didn't want to be ashamed. Was I being motivated by the wrong things, I wondered? Was the fear of the group, the fear of man, pushing me to share Jesus? That wasn't right!

As the weeks went by and we practiced T4T, we learned a lot about the method of Training for Trainers. We tried some things that we decided didn't work well and made adaptations. Other things we found to be very helpful and they started producing good fruit. We kept those things.

But perhaps the greatest change came in my own personal transformation. I had never before been a part of a regular group that studied God's Word then actually kept me accountable for whether or not I did what God was speaking to me about. I had never had accountability in my life in quite that way. No one had ever asked me if I was faithfully sharing Christ each week. I guess that is why disciple-making had never become a lifestyle, though I had a deep, burning passion to reach the unreached.

We realized, in that first "practice" T4T group, that accountability for obedience to God's Word was incredibly powerful. It helped to bring about transformation in our

lives. It was also vitally important, we found, that we create a "no shame" environment of love and deep relationship with one another. When we failed to complete our goals, when we couldn't apply His Word faithfully, we encouraged and affirmed each other. Together we all grew. As a team and as individuals, we were being transformed.

I can honestly say that it was this process of friendly, relational, but consistent accountability to be obedient to God's Word that transformed me from a disciple into a disciple-maker. I am so grateful we didn't just teach others to do T4T, but that we practiced it first ourselves.

Accountability For Obedience is a Non-Negotiable

Whether you use Training for Trainers (T4T), Discovery Bible Study (DBS), or some other approach in starting a Disciple Making Movement, the element of accountability for obedience has to be in place. It is a key catalyst and driver of rapid growth. It propels the movement forward and facilitates God's process of transformation in the disciples' lives.

As you work through the awkwardness in the early stages, accountability to one another for disciple-making activity becomes a norm. It becomes a part of the DNA of the movement. Those who come to Christ and are discipled in this way don't find it strange; they experience it as normal. It is those of us who come from traditional church backgrounds that feel uncomfortable at first. That is because in most churches there is little to no true discipleship happening. Accountability is not a part of our Western church culture at all, and we have exported that church culture to the rest of the world. This is not, however, the way Jesus made disciples.

Jesus was not hesitant or timid in requiring obedience. He modeled a consistent, relational, accountability with those He led. Some of His most profound parables were about the importance of obedience.

There is one short parable Jesus told that we all learned in Sunday School. It is the story of two men. One man builds a house on sand, another on a rock. The man who built on the rock was called the wise man and the other man was called foolish. But do you remember why they were called that? For some strange reason, we often miss the point of this story when we learn it as kids! We easily remember the well-known children's song, "The wise man built his house upon the rock...."

But here is the main point. The one who builds on the rock is the one who hears the Word and puts it into practice... the one who immediately obeys. When the challenges of life come, he will have a strong foundation (Matt. 7:24-27).

The Same Foundation of Obedience is Needed in a Movement

The same is true of a movement. A movement develops a firm foundation for rapid and sustained growth when accountability for putting God's Word into practice is a normal part of how discipleship happens.

We also find Jesus asking His disciples for reports on their disciple-making activities. In Luke 8, 9 and 10 he sends the disciples out to share about the kingdom. When they return, he asks for a report of what had happened. He debriefs them and then teaches them based on what had been done.

Jesus said in John 14:15 "If you love me, keep my commands" and again in John 15:14 "You are my friends if you do what I command." This was not optional, nor was it legalistic. But it did sort out the true disciples from those who were just interested seekers. In our movements, we must do the same. For Jesus, it was obedience that was the evidence of the depth of relationship with Him.

What is Friendly Accountability?


When training church planters, I like to call it friendly accountability. This emphasizes that we do not shame anyone and that we must ask obedience-related questions in a friendly manner. Many of the cultures we are trying to start movements in are honor/shame-based. We in no way want to cause our disciples to feel ashamed. Nor do we want to be manipulative or coercive. Instead, we want to develop an atmosphere of loving support, encouragement, faith and risk-taking in the groups we start. We need to train our disciples and the leaders we develop to practice accountability without the use of shame.

In addition to being shame-based, most of the cultures where there are unreached people are also communal. When we decide to obey God's Word together as a group, we can then evaluate as a group how we are doing. This prevents individuals from feeling shame and helps them stay inspired to continue.

Celebrate testimonies and breakthroughs together. Pray for one another when one or two in the group are finding it difficult to obey Jesus' commands. But don't, please don't, go

light on developing a culture of obedience in the movement. It is crucial to both multiplication and transformation. It certainly was in my life and it has been in the movements I've worked with. But together with obedience-based discipleship, be relational. Love deeply. Be compassionate and supportive. Create a strong community in the fellowships. Spend time together outside of the Bible study times. Eat together. Cry and grieve together. Become a family. This relational commitment, together with accountability to obedience to Jesus, will propel you forward.

Start Now

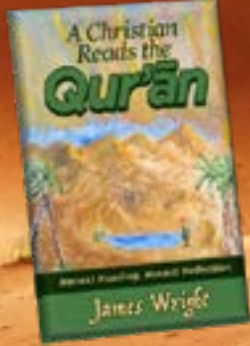
Are you interested in starting a movement? Exploring the idea? Why not do what we did and start with your own DBS or T4T group in your home? Find a group of people and willingly pursue accountable relationships in both following Jesus and fishing for men. As you begin to do this, you will learn much more about what a house church/disciple-making group in a movement looks like. You will definitely grow as well. And who knows? It could launch a new movement! God likes to take small beginnings and do the miraculous through them. 

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