

The MEASURE of A MINISTRY

Chris Adsit

“A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pews,” Dallas Theological Seminary pillar Dr. Howard Hendricks once observed. If our church and mission leaders are unclear or confused about their objectives and priorities, then those they are leading will be even less focused, less effective and less satisfied with their lives in the Kingdom.

Prayer? Evangelism? Youth programs? Senior adults? Bible translation? Feeding the poor? Worship services? Fundraising? Bible studies? Home fellowships? Are our congregations drowning in options, spread too thin? Do church leaders often feel like the juggler on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, trying to keep two dozen plates spinning simultaneously, not willing that any should perish? No doubt. But this broad spectrum of unfocused activity often contributes to the fog in the pews more than anything else.

The question every leader must ask is: “How does this ministry fit into the primary imperative of the Great Commission to *make disciples*?” If a ministry doesn’t dovetail with Christ’s foundational contextual command for ministry—disciplemaking—then we have marginalized His desires. Any ministry can devolve into nothing more than impressive religious activity that helps Christians feel good about themselves but does not result in personal transformation.



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Tom Nelson, pastor of Denton Bible Church in Texas once wrote,

If we as a church succeed in every area, but fail to make disciples who can spiritually multiply, then ultimately we have failed. Yet if we fail in every other area, but succeed in spiritual multiplication, then ultimately we have succeeded.

This is the measure of our ministries.

Begin with the End in Mind

For church leaders to sharpen their focus on disciplemaking, they must first understand the “finished product.” As I have queried church leaders around the world in my travels, asking for a biblical definition of the word *mathetes* (disciple), I have been amazed at how few can supply one. Mist in the pulpit. Most definitions are born of personal bias or a prejudiced reading of the Scriptures reflecting earlier training. But what did Jesus mean when He told His disciples to make disciples? A literal translation of the Greek word would be simply, “a learner,” but when Jesus used the word, there were far more nuances. Here’s a good start:

A disciple is a person-in-process who is eager to learn and apply the truths that Jesus Christ teaches him, resulting in ever-deepening commitments to Christ and to a Christlike lifestyle.

This definition takes in the elements of process-orientation as opposed to instant spirituality; intentional learning; the necessity of application instead of the mere accumulation of knowledge; obedience to Christ; relationship to Christ; imitation of Christ, and—springboarding off that last element—servanthood, centrality of love, self-feeding, fruit production and **multiplying all of the above to the next generation of believers.**

Assess where your church or mission organization is currently putting its efforts. The activities that are clearly contributing to the production of *the above elements* must be retained and enhanced. The ones that don’t should be adjusted or eliminated.

To dispel the mist, this mindset must permeate the thinking of the entire leadership of a church or

mission organization. Intentional multiplication of the life of Christ in each of our members must be tattooed on the foreheads and pervasive in the DNA of even the rank-and-file. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim Him, admonishing **every man** and teaching **every man** with all wisdom, so that we may present **every man** complete in Christ” (emphasis added). We must abandon the “program” mentality and embrace the “every man” mindset.

First Things First

When shopping for a new church, most young couples ask the pastor “Do you have a youth program?” If not, they move on because one of their primary concerns is how this church is going to care for their children. I think this is the first question God asks a church too—concerning *His* children. “If I bring My babies to your church, will you take care of them? If not, I’ll take them someplace else.”

There are at least two reasons why any ministry must be intentional and aggressive about initial follow-up of new believers:

- the enemy the new Christian has just acquired, and
- the pattern that must be set early.

John Wesley speaks eloquently to this first point:

Preaching like an apostle without joining together those that are awakened and training them in the way of God is only begetting children for the murderer.

How many new Christians were never “adopted” into a Christian family, but left out on the doorstep to perish? I am not referring to loss of salvation, but to a life sentence of confusion, failure and defeat, with no clue how to plug into the life and power of the Kingdom.

Secondly, as the twig is bent, so grows the tree. A child’s basic personality is formed by the time he or she is four or five years old. Disciplemaking ministries have observed for decades that the attitudes, habits and priorities that a new Christian adopts within the first six months to a year of their conversion will usually set their sails for the rest of their lives. This fact must not escape our attention or our intentions.

Need-oriented vs. Program-oriented

Here’s a challenge for you: In keeping with the “every man” mindset, encourage your disciplers to “personalize” their approach. That is, rather than simply herding new Christians through a program, form groups of three to five led by a more mature Christian. Use a curriculum as a road map, but allow the needs of the young disciples, their ability to grasp and apply new concepts, and the direction of the Holy Spirit to determine the pace, sequence and depth of your

times together. In this rich small-group context, each member will gain a sense of true, biblical fellowship, establish relationships with their peers, and—in their cross-talk—learn how to teach others, to encourage and be encouraged, and to hold accountable and be held accountable.

As a growing disciple understands and applies the basic principles of the Christian life, it becomes even more important to employ a need-oriented approach, lest disciples become demotivated by a cookie-cutter system. Never forget 1 Cor. 3:7, “So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.” You may be following a curriculum that dictates a study on stewardship. But God may be hammering the disciple in the area of lust! It would be far more productive to team up with the Holy Spirit in this matter. How will you know? Through two complimentary means:

- constantly looking to God for discernment, and
- asking questions of the growing disciple out of a relationship that is growing in trust, love, loyalty and truth.

Get Some Help

A warning accompanies this approach: Don’t subscribe to “single-relational discipleship.” That is, don’t assume that you, with your vast treasuries of wisdom, knowledge and experience, are the only trainer your disciple needs. If you do, you will indeed duplicate your strengths, but you will also duplicate your weaknesses. We all tend to emphasize our assets and minimize our deficits as we minister to others. For this reason, Christ established His Church to provide a wide variety of gifted men and women “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). As we count on and invest in *this* system, we are working together to reproduce *Christ*, not ourselves. Conduct a survey of the spiritual gifts, natural talents and acquired skills of your church, and encourage disciplers to connect their disciples to appropriate “experts” as needed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us that “Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ.” We must make clear that Christianity is not simply a Get-Out-Of-Hell-Free card or a set of philosophical propositions about Jesus, but that it involves the mandatory choice to take up our crosses and follow Him in an ever-deepening relationship of discipleship, and that *this ministry of multiplication isn’t only the pastor’s job*, but the collective job of the entire church. Only then will the mist rise, the fog disperse, and the light of the gospel truly shine from our churches around the world. 🌐