

Years as a Disciple-Maker: AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM DOWNING

MF: What are your thoughts about the Great Commission?

- First, according to Matthew 24:14, God's timetable awaits our obedience to the Great Commission. What Christ meant by His words, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" is a matter for continuing study. One gathering of Christian statesmen concluded that it will be accomplished when 30 percent of every nation has been evangelized and there is a growing church movement among them.
- Second, through acting as a special consultant for Dr. Ralph Winter for several years, I concluded that his *people group approach* made the Great Commission *definable, measurable, and accomplishable*. By this I mean the Great Commission is **definable** as establishing a witness in every people group (nation), **measurable** as to how far along we are in establishing this witness, and **accomplishable** as we prioritize obedience to this command. In the 100-year period beginning about 600 BC, God made the world aware of His Presence three times as the result of the uncompromising testimony and heroism of six persons by way of a fiery furnace, a lion's den, and a reversed decree intended to slaughter the ancestors of Jesus to prevent His ever being born. With the approaching tidal wave of evangelism and discipling by Story Telling for reaching Oral Learners (estimated to be 70 % of the world's population), and the growing availability of recorded and broadcast messages



Now 97 years old, Jim Downing continues discipling others from his home just outside the Navigators headquarters. He has also resumed a heavy travel and speaking schedule (about a third of his time) since the February 2010 death of Morena, his wife of 68 years.

To discuss this article with me, access an expanded audio form of this interview, or read my essay "How to Know God," join me at the new interactive MF website: MissionFrontiers.org—Jim

of Bible fact and truth, a giant leap is in progress.

- Third, since Christ commanded it, it is possible to accomplish.
- Fourth, any ministry not intentionally in support of Mt 28:18–20 may lack God's full blessing.

Acts 1:8 **mandates** us to provide a witness of Himself to the entire population of the earth. Matthew 28:18–20 reveals discipleship as the **method** by which this is accomplished. God's strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission requires reproducing disciples.

MF: What is a disciple, and what does he do?

Some Bible scholars give special attention to the etymology and popular usage of the Greek *mathētēs* (disciple). This puts more emphasis on the idea of learner/follower than Christ's two-minute sermon in Luke 14:26–35, in which He lists these requirements of a disciple:

- love Him more than *family* (I believe Christ was referring to an adult child choosing to follow Him even if family opposes),
- love Him more than *career*,
- love Him more than *material things*, and
- *identify* with Him daily.

The Bible also tells us what a disciple does:

- continues in the Word (Jn 8:31),
- loves other disciples as Christ has loved His own (Jn 13:34–35), and
- bears much fruit (Jn 15:8).

MF: How did Christ make disciples?

In Luke's Gospel we find recorded 11,000 of the words Jesus spoke while on earth. At an average speaking rate of 200 words per minute, these words of Christ in Luke can be repeated in 55 minutes.

If we allow reasonable time for all of Christ's recorded activities, plus 12 hours off per day, we can only account for about three percent of His time during His last 3 1/2 years on earth. From John 17 and elsewhere, I would suggest that Jesus majored in three activities:

- He imparted *knowledge* by *teaching*.
- He imparted *skill* by *guided experience*.

- He imparted *character* by *example/modeling*.

Different levels of information depend on an appropriate context to be effectively received:

- General information can be delivered to large groups orally or in writing.
- More complicated information requires an interactive setting, such as a small group.
- Intimate life-changing information requires **one-on-one** interaction in an atmosphere of mutual trust, transparency and confidentiality.

Learning and subsequent growth occurs as we receive answers and solutions to the questions and problems *that most intensely concern and interest us*. **One-on-one** is best suited to meet these needs.

Barred from the synagogue and public meetings, one of Paul's greatest successes was in Thessalonica, where he provided spiritual parenting to individuals. "As you well know, we dealt with you **one by one**, as a father deals with his children..." (I Thess 2:11 NEB).

MF: How does a disciple bear fruit?

Genesis chapter one strongly emphasizes that everything God created, "contained the seed to reproduce after its kind" (Gen 1:11-12). This must be true spiritually also. The process is not complicated. The potential disciplinemaker recalls the steps in the process by which he or she became a disciple and repeats the process with others. They are familiar with the process and know it has been successful in their own lives. This is done using their own particular gifts in imparting knowledge and skill. Early in the process, those becoming disciples are guided into passing on to others that which has been imparted to them, including participation in active evangelism and exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). If those being disciplined have questions and problems not encountered by their mentor, they may need to consult the one who originally disciplined their mentor or some other resource.

MF: What is spiritual parenting?

Just as a newborn child needs a parent to survive and mature, every new Christian and every Christian whose growth has stalled can be helped by a parent's nurturing.

Maturity must be our goal. In the physical world, maturity occurs when a plant, tree, or animal reproduces. Those brought to maturity *will* reproduce, continuing the chain of spiritual generations which is the key to fulfilling the Great Commission.

MF: After attending a Real Life Ministries¹ Immersion, you declared it the best church model you have seen for making reproducing

disciples. What is distinctive about RLM?

Real Life Ministries has identified the stages of Christian growth, from *infancy* to *maturity*, and has innovated a plan and resource to meet the need at each stage of growth. They have mastered spiritual parenting.

MF: In your essay "How to Know God" you distinguish between *knowing God* and *knowing about God*. Explain this difference.

In Matthew 7:22-23 Jesus tells those who claimed to have served Him that He never knew them. How well we know a person is relative to the number and depth of our **shared experiences**. Your parents, spouse or a friend know you best because of your shared experiences.

Our first shared experience with God is when we exchange our sinful past for His forgiveness and gift of eternal life. He responded. Then He shares a spiritual task He wants us to do such as witnessing to someone or helping someone in their spiritual journey. We obey and He shares His joy.

Of my acquaintances, those who seem to know Him best are those who trust Him to meet their needs on a day-by-day basis. A few years ago a friend drove me to the airport. I felt led to give him \$60. The next day he sent me a letter saying his gas tank had been empty, he had needed to pay for a prescription for his wife and for some groceries, and the \$60 was the exact amount he had needed. Such was a daily experience with him and his family. They knew Him well from the daily mutual sharing.

As with a human friend, intimacy seems to fade when we are not sharing experiences regularly.

MF: What else do you feel strongly about?

As previously stated, Christ's method for raising up men to change the world was to impart **knowledge** by teaching, **skill** by guided experience, and **character** by modeling and example. We have become far too knowledge centered, as though every problem can be solved by more knowledge: read a book, attend a class, etc.

Our great spiritual teaching institutions would do well to supplement knowledge with guided experience as a medical school and other skill imparting institutions do. When a pastor or Christian leader asks what suggestions I have for strengthening their ministry, I reply with a question: "Do you have a department of **guided experience** for taking potential disciples from the knowledge stage to the reproducing stage?"

The making of disciples is not an end in itself. The end result is evangelism, and disciples are the means.

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Drawing Strength from Others

On our own we may find it difficult to pursue discipling in the face of cultural pressures to simply be productive, but we can find strength in community. In just a few hours a month we can start meeting with colleagues for peer coaching to be disciplers.

Each of us has spheres of influence where we can become intentional about sharing tasks and enlisting and coaching others to become disciplers. We can also engage intentionally as catalysts for peer coaching as we learn together to enlist and coach generations of disciplers.

At its heart, discipling individuals is about loving, enjoying and caring for those God has given us—our family, colleagues and friends—and coaching these to fruitbearing maturity as the path to greater fruitfulness rather than simply expecting them to support us in our “more important” ministry.

Solving the Manpower Problem

In the Western church today, we generally pursue great achievements ahead of generations of disciplers. We thus perceive our primary need to be increased staffing to service our ministry vision.

If we would follow Jesus’ lead in discipling those He has given us, and in coaching them to produce generations of disciplers, this problem might disappear.

Next Steps

Bearing fruit in generations of disciplers won’t happen by accident. Let me suggest three steps you can take:

1. On a weekly or daily basis, enter the King’s presence and stay there until you sense that His agenda is covered. (Too often we check in and let Him know what we need without taking time to hear from Him.)
2. Meet once a month for three hours with family, two or three colleagues or friends, or two other couples. Plan and pray together for how you will each become intentional in winning and discipling others, and training them as disciplers. Adapt the T4T format described on p. 13. Rotate leadership and have each report on a different article from this *MF*.
3. Invite three or four other friends to follow your example of starting a monthly discipleship training strategy team, then gather all these teams once a month to learn from one another and compare notes on how God is leading you. Again, rotate leadership.

If you follow some adaptation of this plan, pray and expect each participant to start one or more such groups, then join me at MissionFrontiers.org to share your experiences so we can learn from one another.¹⁴ 

- 1 Table shading reflects estimates in Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch’s article “Finishing the Task,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, William Carey Library Publishers, Fourth Edition (January 2009).
- 2 *The Key to the Missionary Problem*, Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1902.

- 3 *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Zondervan, 2009).
- 4 See on-line bonus material at MissionFrontiers.org.
- 5 *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, by Richard Swenson, NavPress, 1995 (re-released in 2004).
- 6 *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits*, by Richard Swenson, NavPress, 1998.
- 7 CLC Publications 1979, 2007 reprint in modernized English.
- 8 *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- 9 See Jim Downing’s interview, on p. 17 of this *MF*.
- 10 See Lisa Sells’ article on Avery Willis, DNA21, and Real Life Ministries, on p. 6 of this *MF*.
- 11 See SimplyTheStory.org and OralBible.com (International Orality Network).
- 12 The two-day experience Jim and I had in RLM’s model is available most months at RLM’s facility in Idaho (near Spokane, WA). See RealLifeMinistries.com/immersion-one for the schedule and other details.
- 13 Available free at BrookHills.org/media/series/follow-me.
- 14 For an interesting exploration of what more may be involved in discipling “peoples,” see Landa Cope’s book—*An Introduction To The Old Testament Template: Rediscovering God’s Principles for Discipling All Nations*, (The Template Institute Press, 2006). Note: a new 2011 edition is now available from YWAM Publishing. To find the entire book on-line, visit MissionFrontiers.org

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MF: Can spiritual reproduction really complete the Great Commission?

If Adam’s listed descendants each produced only 10 offspring during his lifetime, Adam would have had more than 10,000,000 descendants when he died at age 930. In *The Key to the Missionary Problem*² Andrew Murray quotes the appendix of the 1900 Student Missionary Conference:

IF there were only one Christian in the world, and he worked and prayed a year to win one friend to Christ, and IF these two then continued each year to win one more, and IF every person thus led into the kingdom led another to Christ every year, in thirty-one years every person in the world would be won for Christ.”

This information gives credence to Dawson Trotman’s theoretical belief that the world can only be reached for Christ when human population growth is matched by spiritual reproduction. 

- 1 See accompanying article on p 6.
- 2 Modernized in 1979 by Leona Choy (CLC Publishing), 2007 reprint