

Why Build Disciples?

-- Dr. Edward Watke Jr. --

Consider:

Jesus' last command to His church was to "make disciples of all nations" (**Matthew 28:19-20**). Years ago, a well known speaker said the following at a pastor's conference. *"If you're making converts and not disciples, five years from now you'll have less help than today, and more problems. To have a Biblical and lasting ministry, all of us must make disciples."* Could this be one major reason so many pastors and missionaries are losing heart? Who should be involved in discipling? Only the pastors, missionaries, or other full-time servants? Doesn't every parent need to become a discipler?

"Would you spend as much time preparing yourself to meet the needs of one person as you would preparing a sermon for five thousand? How much do you believe in the potential of one?" ~ K. Bruce Miller

All of us desire to help the sick, the broken, those needing counseling and immediate lifting. We freely give private time to "problem" people. And seeing at times little response through this costly time process, we neglect the staggering potential of giving priority time to potential people . . . discipling as Jesus did for three years. Surely we want to be like our Lord. Then why have so many stopped with Jesus' public ministry as their model, excluding His private ministry of making disciples? Jesus keeps after us, *"If any man serve me let him follow me."* (**John 12:26**).

Was There Old Testament Discipling?

The concept of sharing with another what God is sharing with you is centuries old. Moses opened his heart and life to Joshua. When you study the interrelationship of the two you can't but see the tremendous importance of Moses's impute into Joshua's life. But the sharing approach wasn't a natural idea for Moses. God set a pattern for instruction by commanding Moses to share his life with Joshua in **Deuteronomy 3:28**: *"But charge Joshua, and encourage him, and strengthen him; for he shall go over before this people."*

Moses was to pour into his apprentice, Joshua, all that God was teaching him. This meant giving Joshua much personal time in which he would learn by observation and conversation. God's servant Moses became a human channel for developing Joshua into a servant of God.

Why would God have to command Moses to break away from a pattern of ministry to the thousands to touch just a single life? Because it is a man's natural tendency to see the needs of the many en masse, rather than to see the potential in a single life surrendered to God's total will. As Sam Shoemaker once said, *"Men are not hewn out of the mediocre mass wholesale, but one by one."* **Dad, Mom, you can only mold your children one on one.**

Elijah, too, had disciples, in a school for young prophets. Through this band of men, God would work to bring either revival or judgment to Israel. Among them was Elisha, a like-hearted young man. Amazingly, Elisha asked Elijah for a double portion of his power with

God. He had seen the miracle and might of God through the strong arm of Elijah. Through discipline and vision sharing, Elisha had learned to ask bold things of God. **(Read, study the chapters of I Kings 18 through II Kings 4.)**

There are other Old Testament examples of one person investing his life in another's: The commands in Deuteronomy chapters four, five, and six (also eleven) were given about discipling our own families as we prepare them to pass on the faith. The concrete commands of fathers to teach their children who would in turn teach their own is very clear and compelling. (see **Deuteronomy 4:9 and 6:6-7** now). This teacher-pupil emphasis laid a foundation for the ministry of discipling in the New Testament.

Consider: Jesus' Public Ministry

Jesus had a broad public ministry, involving four basic approaches.

He preached. The multitudes heard of the kingdom, of judgment on religious hypocrisy, and of the nature of God through Jesus' preaching. He brought new revelation to Old Testament concepts buried in tradition. He revealed the ultimate truth about Himself and *"The common people heard him gladly"* (**Mark 12:37**) as He preached with love and authority.

He taught. He taught as no man had ever taught — to the multitudes on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, to groups in villages, to individuals in the privacy of their homes, to the curious, and to the committed. He revealed truth in its raw purity through parables that illuminated the reality of life. It is not surprising that He used all ten methods of teaching cataloged by modern scholars. Jesus was a master Teacher, but He also was a discipler and mentor of men.

He healed. No one ever left Jesus' presence still wanting wholeness. On one occasion, many people gathered around Him, *"And the whole multitude sought to touch him; for there went virtue out of Him, and healed them all"* (**Luke 6:19**). A world without hospitals and medical insurance found the Great Physician and sought never to let Him go.

He performed miracles. The crowds hovered about and followed as the Master healed the leper, gave sight to the blind, fed multitudes, and raised the dead. His disciples were awed when He calmed the storm. In the stillness that followed, they saw Jesus walking on the water through the mists toward their boat. It was this the common people were largely desiring and for which they followed Him.

Historically, the Christian Church has embraced many aspects of Christ's public ministry, but it has often neglected the examples set by Christ in His private ministry.

Especially Consider -- Jesus' Private Ministry

1. Jesus also had a strategic private ministry that was so simple that it has been overlooked as a principle of Church mission. The compelling commitment of Christ was to build disciples who would multiply the message of His life, death, and resurrection to all nations. He said, *"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, (and make disciples of all nations) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..."* (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

2.

2. If we are to copy Jesus' total ministry, then the Church must reach out both in evangelism and in the establishing of converts. As the converts grow, they, too, can be taught how to equip and train other believers who in turn will reach others through the process of spiritual multiplication.
3. Soul-winning is not disciple making, but soul-winning is vital if the disciples are going to be able to reproduce themselves in the lives of others. Evangelism is the first link in the chain of spiritual multiplication.
4. Churches with an overemphasis on baptisms and programs, or an undue concern for "quality membership," must reconsider Christ's command to make disciples. Saving souls and building disciples are inseparably linked in Scripture.

Disciple making Is A Workable Method

I think back over ministry since 1961 when I began discipling those who I had lead to Christ. The results of that ministry were dramatic. There are many who are now serving the Lord who possibly (and probably) would have dropped by the wayside if discipling had not taken place. They became the Sunday School teachers, the deacons, and leaders in the local churches where I pastored over twenty years.

Disciple making has no prestige rating, no denominational category; but the results are consistently better than anything I have experienced in more than 30 years of working with people. There are several reasons.

Discipling:

1. is one of the most strategic ways to have an unlimited personal ministry. It may be done at any time, by anyone, anywhere, and among any age group.
2. is the most flexible of ministries. Since it need not be done within any time frame or organizational structure, the disciple maker can be extremely flexible.
3. is the fastest and surest way to mobilize the whole body of Christ for evangelism. The goal of discipling is not just more disciples, but to build reproducers who will go about the reproduce themselves in the lives of others. One of the fastest ways to increase baptisms and deepen the quality of life of those reached for Christ is through discipling.
4. in all nations becomes both a result of evangelizing and a means to the accomplishment of world evangelization.
5. has more long-range potential for fruit than any other ministry. The Lord wants us to be rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith (see **Colossians 2:6-7** here). This takes time and care. Caring for people is the essential component of truly discipling others. Follow-up is done by some one rather than some thing.
6. will provide the local church with mature lay leaders who are Christ-centered and Word-oriented. The pew warmers are many; the laborers are few. Laborers are a product of Spirit-guided discipling in the church.

Building into the lives of others is God's plan for raising up new deacons, teachers, and other church leaders. The nominating committee's appeal for workers will become a shout of praise to God when church members are multiplying Christlike disciples. Study the book of Acts, it was discipling that built the saints.

The Cycle of Leadership

As we have just seen, building disciples develops the future leaders of the church. How then can we accelerate leadership training in order to be prepared for the future?

Evangelism is the means to making converts and the training ground for developing disciples. When the church builds disciples, it produces converts; thus, the church grows. Discipleship is the fastest way to multiply leaders who will expedite both evangelism and discipleship.

Through follow-up the convert is loved, fed, protected, and trained. He becomes a disciple, a growing follower of Christ. As the disciple receives individual training (by a more mature disciple), he becomes able to multiply. A multiplier has trained one or more disciples who have reached another. A builder of multipliers trains other multipliers.

The discipling process becomes a cycle of training as each leader develops growing disciples. The cycle is completed and begins again as each convert grows to his full potential in the likeness of Christ, and thus disciples others who become reproducers in their own right. We reach out into a lost world represented by church evangelism by all who are Spirit-led converts, disciples, multipliers, and builders.

This cycle of leadership is a visual concept of church growth through receiving training for the task and reaching out to the unsaved. Through a person-to-person ministry, the multipliers (the first generation) advise, encourage, and sharpen disciples (second generation). In a few weeks or months, God develops a team of witnesses. They visit friends, relatives, neighbors, or job contacts, and some people are born again. When these second generation disciples have won converts (third generation), multiplication has begun.

Leadership references:

Mark 3:14

Ephesians 4:11-16

Colossians 2:6-7

Mark 16:15

Colossians 1:28-29

II Timothy 2:2

Matthew 28:18-20