

# THE ROLE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN CHURCH LIFE

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The Great Commission will never be finished through mass crusades, but through one-by-one ministry, said Billy Graham.<sup>1</sup> The church great task will be carried out only when we update our philosophy of ministry with the principles revealed in the ministry of Christ, that is discipleship. Preaching and teaching are vital in church ministry, but they cannot replace the discipling task. In this paper I want to discuss the meaning of discipleship in the Bible, how important it is for the church ministry in nurturing the believers so that they can grow to Christ-like maturity, and how to apply it in the church.

## Definition of Discipleship

A disciple (from the Latin *discipulus*, a pupil) is one who receives instruction from another; a scholar; a learner; especially, a follower who has learned to believe in the truth of the doctrine of his teacher; an adherent in doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Drovdahl says that the image of discipleship dominant today offers a fairly restricted picture of discipleship's setting, content, and relationships. The setting is one-on-one with regular meetings between discipler and disciple. The content is programmed instruction in spiritual life, often combined with instruction in the basic beliefs of the faith.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Spirit* (Word Books, 1978), 147.

<sup>2</sup><http://machaut.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/WEBSTER.sh?WORD=disciple>

The relationship is highly directive, with the mature believer guiding the less mature believer.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes discipleship is used synonymously with mentoring. M. J. Anthony, however, argues that although similar in many ways, there are some important differences between the two. Discipleship is concerned with the quality of relationship which exists between the new believer and the Lord. It is focused on character development, since out of one's character behavior emanates. It is, in essence a spiritual dimension or development. Mentoring, on the other hand, is more general in nature. It deals with training in character but also concerns itself with issues related to vocational preparation, developing healthy interpersonal relationships, fostering life skills, etc. In short mentoring is preparing someone for life in its multifaceted dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

Discipleship is a process which enables a person to grow in the Lord Jesus Christ and equips them to overcome joyfully the pressures and trials of this present life. This process requires believers to constantly examine their thoughts, words and actions in accordance with the Word of God. We should always be ready to give testimony for the hope that is within us (1 Pt 3:15) and disciple others to walk in His way.<sup>5</sup>

Bob Dukes defines discipleship as the process in which more mature believers in cooperation with the Spirit assist younger believers as they progress in their faith toward Christ-like maturity and the production of good works.<sup>6</sup>

According to Allen Hadidian, discipleship brings about the fulfillment of three desires that God has for each individual. God's first desire for men is that they come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Secondly, once a person has become a believer, God desires that he grow to spiritual maturity. Thirdly, God desires that men become spiritual reproducers. So, according to Hadidian, there are three phases of church job. Phase 1 is to evangelize men; phase 2 is to edify men; and phase 3

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Drov Dahl, "The Developmental Use of Mentoring", in *Nurture That is Christian: Developmental Perspectives on Christian Education*, eds. James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1995), 227.

<sup>4</sup>Michael J. Anthony, "Mentoring", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.readgodsword.com/christian-discipleship.html>

<sup>6</sup>Bob Dukes, *A Model for Strategic Disciples Building* (Carnegie, Fayetteville: Worldwide Discipleship Association), 2.

is to equip men so that they can be sent to reproduce themselves in others. Based on that understanding Hadidian gives a more structured definition of discipleship. Discipleship is the process by which a Christian with a life worth emulating commits himself for an extended period of time to a few individuals who have been won to Christ, the purpose being to aid and guide their growth to maturity and equip them to reproduce themselves in a third spiritual generation.<sup>7</sup>

In summary definition of discipleship is a process in which a more mature believer guides younger (in faith) believers with commitment through a close relationship so that they can grow spiritually toward maturity in Christ.

### **Discipleship in the Old Testament**

#### *Moses*

Moses opened his heart and life to Joshua. But the sharing approach wasn't natural idea for Moses. God set a pattern for instruction by commanding Moses to share his life with Joshua (Deut. 3:28). 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.<sup>8</sup>

When Moses discipled Joshua he became a very important figure in the Israelites salvation history. Joshua's success was due to good discipleship training. Joshua was trained when he was young. Moses trained Joshua to fight with the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-16), in prayer as he supported Joshua's arm. He entrusted with the responsibilities of the Tabernacle (Ex 33:11). Moses trained Joshua in such a way so that after his death Joshua might continue to lead God's people to the promised land.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Allen Hadidian, *Successful Discipling* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 19-22, 29-30.

<sup>8</sup>Waylon B. Moore, *Multiplying Disciples. The New Testament Method for Church Growth* (Minnesota: NavPress, 1981), 27-28.

<sup>9</sup>Kekhrongulo Kapfo, "Toward Building A Missionary Church Through Discipleship in Nagaland" (master's thesis, Chongshin University, 2002) 37.

### *Elijah*

Elijah 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.<sup>10</sup>

### **Discipling of Israel**

When discipling is put in a general sense, the whole Israelites may be taken as undergoing discipleship. In learning obedience they knew who the Lord was and realized the covenant relationship (Jer 24:7; 31:33; Ez 11:20; Zec 8:8). Many painful disciplines and constant obedience to the will of God was required to become God's people. From the history of Israel it becomes obvious that obedience and disobedience makes a great difference in their life. The disobedience of Israel which led to the downfall of Israel's kingdom and subsequently captivity was obviously a failure of discipling the next generations. Therefore, discipling is a requisite for ongoing spiritual life of the chosen people of God.<sup>11</sup>

### **Discipleship in the New Testament**

#### *Discipleship in Jesus' Ministry*

All started by Jesus calling a few men to follow him. This revealed immediately the direction his evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not the programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Moore, 28.

<sup>11</sup>Kapfo, 38.

<sup>12</sup>Robert E. Coleman, "Selection of Disciples," in *Discipleship*, ed. Billie Hanks, Jr. and William A. Shell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 41.

In noting this fact, however, one does not want to miss the practical truth of how Jesus did it. Here is the wisdom of his method, and in observing it, we return again to the fundamental principle of concentration upon those he intended to use. One cannot transform a world except as individuals in the world are transformed, and individuals cannot be changed except as they are molded in the hands of the Master. The necessity is apparent not only to select a few laymen, but to keep the group small enough to be able to work effectively with them.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that Jesus' decision to twelve apostles excluded others from following him, for as we know, many more were numbered among his associates, and some of these became very effective workers in the church. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that there was a rapidly diminishing priority given to those outside the twelve.<sup>14</sup> The discipleship that Jesus called for differs from discipleship as it developed among the rabbis. The Jewish student chose his rabbi; his objective was to absorb his rabbi's teaching and to imitate his life. When he had applied himself sufficiently he could himself become a rabbi. For his part, Jesus took the initiative in calling his disciples. The disciples' commitment was to the person of Jesus and the disciples' duty was to proclaim Jesus. The Christian always remains a disciple; he never becomes a rabbi (Mt 23:8).<sup>15</sup>

### *Discipleship in the Gospels*

The Gospels, despite their historical framework as a life of Jesus, make clear relevance of the discipleship of the Twelve for the life of the early Christian community. *Mark* works the thought of discipleship into his motif of the messianic secret. We must follow the hidden Messiah on his way to the cross. *Matthew* links the summons to discipleship with the unconditional requirement of love and righteousness (Sermon on the Mount), even to the point of self-denial and readiness for martyrdom (10:38-39; 16:24-25). *Luke* uses the term "discipleship" only

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>15</sup>Augustine Stöck, O.S.B., "Disciple/Discipleship in The New Testament," in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., et al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 221.

martyrdom (10:38-39; 16:24-25). *Luke* uses the term "discipleship" only relative to the earthly life of Jesus (not in *Acts*) and has a hortatory concern. The call of Jesus demands obedience and changes our attitude to possessions (18:22, 28-30). In discipleship the community practices merciful love and generosity (10:29-37; 11:41; 12:33). In *John* discipleship is the acceptance of revelation in faith (8:12). To follow is the same as to believe (12:44). Discipleship is the same as being in the light and not walking in darkness. Discipleship implies readiness for serving the Revealer and for self-sacrifice (12:26; 13:36-37), even in the period after Easter (21:19-23).<sup>16</sup>

#### *Discipleship in Acts*

Barnabas and Paul (Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-30; 11:22-30): Barnabas opened the way for Paul to associate with the church after his dramatic Damascus road conversion. Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:36-39): Barnabas was willing to part company with Paul in order to work with John Mark. Later, Paul came around to Barnabas's point of view, describing John Mark as "useful to me for ministry." Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos (Acts 18:13, 24-28). Priscilla and Aquila served as spiritual tutors to Apollos at Ephesus. As a result, Apollos became one of the early church's most powerful spokesmen for the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Discipleship in Paul's Ministry*

Paul and Timothy (Acts 16:13; Phil 2:19-23; 1 and 2 Tm): Paul invited Timothy to join him during one of Paul's missionary journeys. Timothy eventually became pastor of the dynamic church at Ephesus. Paul and Titus (2Cor 7:6, 13-15; 8:17; Titus): Paul, along with Barnabas, apparently won this Greek speaking Gentile to the faith and recruited him as a traveling companion and coworker. Titus became a pastor and, according to tradition, the first bishop of the island of Crete.<sup>18</sup>

In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul said to Timothy, "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." Paul taught Timothy; and Timothy

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<sup>16</sup>Georg Strecker, "Discipleship, New Testament," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 851.

<sup>17</sup>Anthony, "Mentoring,"

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

shared what he knew with faithful men; these faithful men would then teach others also. And so the process goes on and on.<sup>19</sup>

### **Characteristics of Discipleship**

Allen Hadidian delineates seven marks identifying discipleship that distinguish it from other ministries. Firstly, in a discipling relationship, the discipler is the spiritual guardian of the disciple (Mark 1, Guardianship). Secondly, the disciple as a godly example is another identifying mark of a discipling relationship (Mark 2, Example). Thirdly, in a discipling ministry, there are clearly defined goals and a plan to achieve those goals (Mark 3, Direction). A discipling ministry requires a long-term commitment (Mark 4, Time). Another identifying mark of a discipling relationship is the commitment of one's life to another (Mark 5, Commitment of One's Life). Because of time and the commitment of one's life to the disciple are essential elements in discipling someone, the discipler must set his own limits on the number of individuals he will disciple (Mark 6, Numerical Limitation). Discipling is building a relationship with someone, a friendship (Mark 7, Friendship).<sup>20</sup> Hull, as quoted by Drov Dahl, identifies three qualities of a discipling relationship: intentionality, accountability, and caring.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Intentionality*

Since development is not automatic, it is particularly important to focus the intentionality in a discipling relationship. Intentional discipling relationships pay attention to the direction of one's experience. When discipleship explores the continuity and direction of people's lives, development is more likely to result.

#### *Accountability*

When discipling relationships provide accountability for the habits of one's life, conditions for development exist. Christian discipleship

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<sup>19</sup>Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit* (Word Books, 1978), 147.

<sup>20</sup>Hadidian, 23-27, 29.

<sup>21</sup>Drov Dahl, 227-231.

has long touted the value of spiritual disciplines in service of transformed living.

### *Caring*

When discipleship has development in view, care will be taken to provide both support and challenge. Support is like “apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prv 25:11). Challenge is like “iron sharpening iron” (Prv 27:17). When both are present in a relationship the optimum environment for development is present.

### **Principles of Discipleship**

There are three main principles in discipleship: 1. Relationships; 2. Teaching; 3. Service.<sup>22</sup>

### *Relationships*

We are called to build a network of relationships so we can build one another up in the faith through friendship and mentoring. Most people are intimidated by discipleship out of ignorance, fear, unawareness, or just not wanting to be bothered out of their “comfort zone.” The term, *discipleship*, has been viewed as something only for the spiritually mature, or just for certain people, such as Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders. We need to see Barnabas and Paul, and, later, Paul and Timothy, where the elder, more experienced Christian takes the inexperienced Christian under his wing, and helps him to become a better, deeper, more effective Christian for God’s glory. Keep in mind that Paul was highly educated and an experienced leader, and although Barnabas may have not been educated formally as Paul was, or at Paul’s level in the world, Barnabas was Paul’s superior in the experience and knowledge of the Word. Friendship, knowledge, experience combined into mentoring, and the quality of the relationship

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<sup>22</sup><http://intothyword.blogspot.com/>



are the keys for this spiritual growth to have happened. Discipleship equals friendship with a Christ-centered focus. However, it is very important that we make disciples in His image, not ours.

### *Teaching*

The other main principle in discipleship is teaching. We are all called, as a church, to teach one another—not only the kids in Sunday school, but also all Christians at all ages and levels—how to live the Christian life. The new Christians (and all Christians for that matter) need sound instructions on how to live the Christian life. We do not learn by magic or osmosis. Although the Spirit will lead, it is still our responsibility to learn and grow, and then to teach others! In most churches, there are some opportunities to be in Bible studies, and even teach. The focus must be to teach the basics first—how to study the Bible, how to pray, how to worship, essential doctrine, etc. And, as we grow, how to be a Christian family, how to find God's will, our conduct in the work place, discovering our spiritual gifts, leadership, and so forth. Then, the deeper expressions into the faith can be explored, along with accountability, and so forth.

### *Service*

We are all called to put our faith into practice! We now take the relationships, mentoring, and learning, and carry it out in daily life. This is often expressed in service projects and missions, but that is only a small, although necessary aspect of service. Service is how we live our lives and model His character on a daily basis to those around us! When we are in ministry, we need to realize, *it is not what I do, but whom I can equip*. As we practice by reciprocating what we have learned to others, we will also be built up.

According to Scripture, being a Christian discipleship involves personal growth characterized by the following:<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup><http://www.readgodsword.com/christian-discipleship.html>

1. Putting Jesus first in all things (Mk 8:34-38).

This requires a change in our lives and choices that may be difficult at times. We need and should be set apart from the world. Our focus needs to be on our Lord and pleasing Him in every area of our life. We must put off self-centeredness and put on Christ-centeredness.

2. By following Jesus' teachings (Jn 8:31-32).

We must be obedient children and doers of the Word. Obedience is the supreme test of faith in God (1Samuel 28:18) and Jesus is the perfect example of obedience as he lived a life on earth of complete obedience to the Father even to the point of death (Phil 3:6-8).

3. By fruitfulness (Jn 15:5-8).

While our job is not producing fruit but is to abide in Christ and the Holy Spirit produces the fruit, this fruit is the result of our obedience. As we become more obedient to the Lord and learn to walk in His ways, our life will change. The biggest change will take place in our hearts and the overflow of this will be new conduct (thoughts, words and actions) representative of these changes.

4. By love for other disciples (Jn 13:34-35).

We are told that love of other believers is the evidence of our being a member of God's family (1 Jn 3:10). Love is defined and elaborated on in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. In examining these verses, we see that love is not an emotion; it is action. We must be doing something and involved in the process. Furthermore, we are told to think more highly of others than ourselves and to look out for their interests (Phil 2:3, 4). If we go on to look at the next verse in Philipians (v. 5) this really sums up what we are to do when it comes to everything - "our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus". What a perfect example He is to us for everything we are to do in our Christian walk.

5. Evangelism - Making disciples of others (Mt 28:18-20).

We are to share our faith and tell nonbelievers about the wonderful changes Jesus Christ has made in our lives. No matter what our maturity level is in Christ, we have something to offer. Some of the

most enthusiastic representatives of the Christian life are new believers who have just discovered the awesome love of God for them. They may not know a lot of Bible verses or the "accepted" way of saying things, but they have experienced the love of the living God of this world and that is exactly what we are to share.

### **Practical Implication**

As we see in the big cities, some churches grow rapidly. In ten to twenty years they became mega-churches with thousands, or even ten thousands, adherents. On the other hand some churches remain stagnate, or even their adherents get decreased. We see also many church adherents move from one church to another one. When they are not satisfied in their church they go to another church. They look for a good preacher and a satisfying service. They have no commitment as church members. They act as church consumers. They never learned to serve each other with other Christians.

In that situation many churches compete in increasing the number of attendants. They have many programs that focus only on the mass. The pastors are concerned only with preaching in Sunday services. What about the quality of the congregations? Do they live a Christian life? Do they grow in faith? Do the church leaders know the congregations' everyday live? Are they sure that the congregations observe what they teach in every Sunday?

For that reason today churches need to apply discipleship. The concern to the mass should be balance with the concern to the individuals, so that the church can insure her ministry before God. The church is to be successful not only in increasing the number of adherents, but also in maturing her people.

Billie Hanks, Jr. says that we stand at a crossroad. However good our method of addition has been, it has not been good enough. By itself, it has proved inadequate. Today's situation calls for new daring, new vision, and return to a full-orbed New Testament philosophy of ministry. We must harness the power of evangelistic multiplication and commit ourselves to the long-range strategy of equipping the entire Lord's people to be spiritual reproducers.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Billie Hanks, Jr., "The Vision for Multiplication" 30.

Finally I suggest church leaders to begin and enhance their discipleship or mentoring work. That starts from top leaders, senior pastors, coming down to the subsequent leaders, as follows:

- Senior Pastor to Associate Pastors and Elders
- Associate Pastors to Cell Group Leaders, Youth Leader, Women Leader, Sunday School Teachers Leader, and other department leaders.
- Elders to Deacons
- Department leaders to church members