

Taking the Mystery Out of Discipleship

The word discipleship has been a mystery to churchmen for over 1500 years. We all know that it is Biblical ... a requirement of fulfilling the Great Commission. Yet most don't understand what the process is, how to do it effectively and what the end result looks like.

Let's start by looking at a Biblical concept found in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49.

So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam (Christ) became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthly; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthly, so also are those who are earthly; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

God has allowed us to understand how things work in the natural first so we can grasp spiritual concepts and truths.

A good example of how this works is found in the story Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-10 as Jesus addresses the issue of child birth in the spiritual realm. After communicating a few spiritual truths to Nicodemus ... Jesus finds that he lacks understanding and then issues a mild rebuke of the older man since he is considered a teacher in Israel.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?

Discipleship is just the Church's word to describe the "spiritual" child-rearing process. That process follows the same pattern as the natural child-rearing process that the whole world knows and practices. Discipleship is not complicated; however **spiritual concepts must be learned and applied in place of the natural ones** ... so that the spirit man can grow.

Discipleship or "spiritual" child-rearing, like natural child-rearing begins with the **conception** of a child and continues in some fashion throughout life. The word disciple simply means learner or "one who applies what he is taught." Just as we can't set a baby in the middle of a room and expect it to become an adult on its own ... so it is in the kingdom of God. Someone must feed, care for, love, hold, speak to and teach the child or it will die. The same thing happens to those

who are “born again” by the Spirit of God … if left on their own they will die. Every child of God needs specific things at specific times in order to grow and become mature in Christ.

The Apostle John describes the three stages of man as: children, young men and fathers.¹ At each level, individuals need different instruction and opportunities to enhance their life … to become all that God designed them to be. The end product is that every person who is “born again” by the Spirit of God should be conformed to the image of Christ.

The command to “make disciples” is a commission … or co-mission as I like to call it. It is not performed by one individual but requires the co-operation of an instructor + the Word of God + the Holy Spirit. The Church usually performs a role similar to that of a mother² in the lives of her children in the earlier years but then begins releasing them to the father’s³ instruction after puberty.

Children are born into families not in shopping malls. God understands that it is easier for them to learn and grow in smaller units, where they can experience love and acceptance. And just as some people are better at raising children than others … it happens that way in the kingdom of God as well. **Remember**, you cannot disciple someone beyond what you have become yourself. That’s why there are qualifications for leadership such as: *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God? (1Timothy 3:4-5)*

We are not to make disciples in our image … but Christ’s. Therefore, what Jesus has to say about discipleship is how we should proceed. In the gospels, we see Jesus interacting with various groups of people: religious leaders, foreigners, and the multitudes. But with those He was discipling … we find His actions and words are quite different from the others. As we focus on the gospels it can be discerned that Jesus has already developed a curriculum of instruction which revolve around His commandments. His disciples were also instructed in a specific order to maximize their growth. Making disciples is neither messy nor haphazard in its approach. Jesus taught His disciples and modeled the process for them … then told them to go and make more disciples.

1. Stay until you are clothed with power from on high.
2. Go into all the world.
3. Preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus name.
4. Baptize those who believe the message … in the name of Jesus.
5. Teach those who have been baptized to observe all that Jesus commanded.

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2)

¹ 1 John 2:12-14 Consider the following:

- Childhood (*Brephos [babe], Padion [children]*) – Education - Student
- Adolescence (*young men*) – *Teknon [son – heir apparent]* – Ministry – Servant - service to God and others
- Adulthood (*fathers*) – *Huios [mature one]* - Disciple making – Elder – leaving a legacy

² Nurturing and teaching.

³ Leading and guiding

The people you should be looking to train are those who have ears to hear. In other words, they have **humility** and are teachable. The other trait you want these people to have is **faithfulness** ... to believe and to put into action what they hear. Pray, ask the Father to open the ears of the deaf so they can hear the truth and for the gift of faith so they can believe the Word and act upon it, because not all have faith.

Although He was a Son, Jesus learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation. (Hebrews 5:8-9) Don't be a helicopter parent saving the children from all their trials ... God uses them; instead let them learn like Jesus did ... by the things they suffer.

What steps can you ... the pastor take in transforming your congregation into disciple makers?

- Constantly remind the congregation about who they are and what God wants them to become. (Like Christ)
- Become familiar with the discipleship (spiritual child-rearing) process yourself; its stages, curriculum and activities.
- Tell the congregation how you and others will be working with them to accomplish their transformation to Christ-likeness.
- Tell them what is expected of them in the way of their time and effort.
- Then, either implement the process yourself or empower someone to help you with it.