

Raising up disciples

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I have a tall stack of books in my library on discipleship, perhaps more than on any other single subject. It started on a family vacation years ago when I read the biography of Dawson Trotman, the founder of Navigators. His single minded passion for Christ inspired me, but it was his particular emphasis on discipleship that marked my 16 year old soul. He became my hero, and from that point on I devoured everything I could pick up on the subject. "The Master Plan of Evangelism" by Colman soon followed, and then other classics like "Disciples are Made, Not Born" by Henrichsen.

These books deeply marked me, and a passion for discipling began to drive all of my major decisions in ministry. Soon it became coupled with a conviction that discipling contains the most powerful model for spreading the kingdom of God. Even today, other than Christ himself, there is probably nothing else that fires my passions more than true living discipleship.

But I am not sure I understand it.

I must confess that my mind is cluttered with competing images when I hear the word. The term discipleship is tacked on thousands of programs, materials, strategies and ministries, like an evangelical proof of purchase seal. I wonder if the label has become an icon in and of itself, so much so that we have forgotten the substance it was designed to describe.

Once on a missions trip in Korea I slipped out to a market to buy a present for my wife. The stalls were stacked with inexpensive clothes but I had something special in mind. After digging through a pile of shirts I remarked to the salesman that I was searching for something that had more of a name brand. "What name brand would you like?" he said with a half grin, opening a cigar box. "Adidas, Nike, Chanel, Gucci, we have them all." I could see that he did - there in his hands were the designer labels for each of these companies. "Just pick the blouse that you want and tell us the label - we can have it ready in five minutes."

I was amused, and just as he promised, my bag was soon packed with something very top of the line. Somehow, however, the label didn't keep the dye in the blouse from bleeding and the seams from unraveling the first time it was washed. The label stayed fresh, colorful and inspiring. Still, it didn't make up for the lack of substance in the garment.

I wonder at times, as I watch what is called discipleship unravel at the seams, if we are aware that we might not be holding the real thing.

Perhaps it would be good to begin with what discipleship is not. Discipleship is not a twelve week course. It is not a manual, nor a program. It is not a weekly meeting, nor a small group Bible study. It is not an institute, and not a prayer journal.

Discipleship may use some of these tools, but to confuse the garment with the life underneath it would be like saying that my son is the clothes that he wears. I can't reach into his closet and say I am holding my son just because I am touching his shirt. His life is much more than the jeans he puts on in the morning.

And the presence of his jeans does not necessarily mean he himself is there.

Discipleship is also not just for professionals, or for people who have time, or for those who possess a particular gifting. It is not an option, not an elective, not just a recommendation. I am convinced that a Christian who is not making disciples is not an obedient Christian. Discipleship is impossible, and yet discipleship is not nearly as

complicated as most people think.

Rich's question caught me off guard, because it was so unexpected. "Could you join us for dinner this week?" I knew the pastor of an 800 member church had other things to do with his time. Besides, I was a no-name Wheaton college student. I tried to give him an easy way out.

"No, I'm serious", he insisted. "How about Friday at 5:00?" I nodded in agreement, and then realized I had no idea what my schedule was for the week. "If there is something on Friday I can cancel it." I thought. "Dinner at Riches house? What is this all about?"

I wondered what he had planned. But when I showed up for dinner, it seemed that nothing was planned, other than a meal with his family and a time of prayer around the table. Then we retired into the family room. Again, nothing in particular seemed to be prepared. Rich asked me questions about school, then shared the gist of the sermon he was preparing for Sunday. "What do you think?" he asked. Two hours later I looked down at my watch. "Where had the evening gone?" I thought. "And how did the conversation end up on spiritual issues that I desperately needed to hear?"

The next week Rich pressed me for a lunch together. I showed up with my Bible and notebook this time, but again it seemed that no lesson had been prepared. During an awkward pause I asked about a passage I hadn't understood in my quiet time. Soon our Bibles were open, and it was so interesting that my French fries got cold on the plate. When we bowed our heads to pray the passion in his voice caught me off guard. This man really seemed to love his Savior. I walked away with a strange hunger to study the Bible. His excitement for the Word of God was somehow contagious.

At church he pressed a book into my hands. "You'll love this." He said. "Let me know when you're done and we can talk about it." I had hundreds of pages of required reading due that week for school, but the book Rich gave me was finished in four days. On my way to meet up for coffee I suddenly realized something. "I am being disciplined." I thought to myself.

And I was.

Somehow the guys had gotten under my skin. I poured my heart out in prayer for them on my knees, glancing back at a smudged list of requests we gathered during our small group meetings. "Brian is headed into a tough final today," I thought, "I wonder if he is keeping his eyes on the Lord." Almost absentmindedly I picked up the phone to give him a call. I couldn't wait till next Tuesday to find out what happened.

A voice rang bright on the other end of the line. Brian told me how God had given peace in a subject where he normally sweated bullets, but that wasn't the reason for his joy. "You know Tom, the guy on my list of friends I want to see come to know Jesus," he said excitedly. Well, he asked me how I felt about the test, and I got to share with him that all of you guys are praying for me. He snickered at me at first, but somehow the conversation kept going and I told him how Christ has changed my life."

Brian's words were tripping over each other in haste to get out of his mouth. "Tom asked some questions I couldn't answer – could we talk about them next week at Bible study?"

I promised him we could, and as we talked I felt a wave of love wash over my heart for this precious high school student "Something is changing," I said to myself as I hung up the phone. "This started just as a guys Bible Study, but about three weeks ago it began to be different. Something is happening in their hearts, and mine as well. I think maybe this is discipleship."

And it was.

My wife Connie can write SMS messages on her mobile phone faster than any person I know. I tell her it is born genius. She tells me it is practice.

Last night it was multitasking. With one hand she sorted laundry while the other hand clattered away on that little bitty keyboard. "Who are you writing?" I asked. "Marketa" came back the answer, without a pause in either the laundry sorting or the typing. I should have known.

Marketa trusted Christ in our youth group seven years ago, but struggled to keep her head above water in the atheistic family she had been raised in. She needed more intensive care, so we invited her to move in with us for a year after graduating from high school. It was an adventure for all of us, but represented a deep labor of love for my wife. They talked about things of the Lord around the dinner dishes and over late evening cups of tea. Marketa saw our family at its finest, and watched us try and sort out things when we were at our worst. In the process, God transformed her life and wove the character of Christ deep into her thirsty soul. Today she is walking with the Lord at her university and dating a fine Christian man.

"How often do you SMS Marketa?" I asked. "I don't know," Connie replied, "I don't keep track." I could hear her scrolling down the message box. "Four times so far today. But you wouldn't believe what God is doing in her heart." I told her that the details would have to wait. "I have to write a chapter on discipleship" I said. The key chatter stopped.

My wife looked up at me. "Dave, do you think a lot of people feel pressure when they hear that word?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "It just seems to me that people think Discipleship is some special formula, some program, some kind of neat package. If someone takes you through the right steps you can say you have 'been discipled' and if you do it to others you can say you are 'discipling them'. I just think it has a lot more to do with following Jesus, and pulling some people close to you so they can follow Jesus too."

I thought back to an event earlier that week, when I walked into the room to find Connie on the phone with an open Bible in her hand reading Scripture to Marketa. Or a few days later when she stepped out of the health club to pray with her over the phone about a situation at home.

"You know Connie," I said. "I think that what has happened between you and Marketa, that this really is discipleship." "Maybe so," she said, reaching down to finish up her message.

And it is.

I still don't understand it. But I have experienced it, and I long for more of it. I wonder what could happen if true discipling characterized each of our ministries. What could be the cumulative transforming affect if young people in each of your youth groups were truly shaped into the image of Christ through discipleship relationships? What if discipling began to take on a life all its own, bigger than any program or structure or calendar of events? How could history be different if young people left your ministry and continued to make disciples for the rest of their lives?

Here are some principles to keep in mind as you try to get your hands around the real thing.

Discipleship begins with a passion for Christ.

"Our Lord's first obedience was to the will of His father, not to the needs of men. His obedience brought the outcome of the saving of men. If I am devoted to the cause of humanity only, I will soon be exhausted and come to the place where my love will falter. But if I love Jesus Christ personally and passionately, I can serve humanity though men treat me as a

doormat." Oswald Chambers

Every effective disciple maker I know is passionate about Jesus Christ.

This passion is contagious, giving substance, meaning and purpose to the activities of discipleship. Rich taught me a great deal. But more than anything he modeled the Christian life before me. I wanted to experience the kind of walk with Christ I saw displayed in his life, and for years afterward I mined every memory of our times together for clues as to how I could know Jesus like he did. He pointed my gaze to Christ, because that was where his gaze was directed.

Sometimes I cringe when I hear the phrase "my disciple". This is a term we find in the New Testament only coming from the lips of Jesus. Paul talked about "my son" Timothy, or "my brother" Ephaphroditus. A group of young believers were called "my children" and coworkers named "my fellow servants". But the authors of the New Testament never addressed a fellow believer as "my disciple" or "my follower."

The disciples we make never belong to us. We are to make disciples of Christ, not of Dave or Bob or Laurie. In the book of Corinthians Paul responds with horror when he hears that some are calling themselves followers of Paul or Apollos. "Is Christ divided? he wrote, with evident frustration. "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (I Cor 1:13) He knew the great commission commands us to make disciples of Christ, not of ourselves. If their attention is to be on Jesus, our attention must be there as well.

Once during my high school years a seminary student started a "discipleship group" with myself and some of my friends. We dutifully met at 6:30 am once a week, because discipleship is all about commitment. We held each other accountable and discussed a lesson, because discipleship is about growth and obedience. At the same time, the entire experience seemed dull and burdensome. I could see no particular fruit being born in my life, and I sensed the same from the other participants.

After several months, our leader confided that he had lost his passion for Jesus in the press of his theological education. Quiet times had slipped to the wayside, his communion with the Savior practically non-existent. With no fire in his soul, there was nothing but dry wood in ours. A passion for Christ is contagious – unfortunately the lack of it is contagious as well. Our meetings had all of the structure of discipleship, but none of the life. Jesus was absent.

I came across the following poem in college, from an unknown author, which deeply marked my life.

"Not only in the words you speak,
to you so dear, to me so dim.
But when you came to me you brought a sense of Him
And from your eyes he beckons me
And from your lips his voice is spread
Till I lose sight of you and see the Christ instead"

Is it a beatific smile, a holy light upon your brow
No, I saw his presence when you laughed just now."

Discipleship begins with a passion for Christ.

Discipleship involves inviting others to "be with" you.

In Mark 3:14 Christ appointed twelve—"designating them apostles--that they might **be with him** and that he might send them out to preach." We see here Christ's initiative in challenging men and calling them to who they would become. We see his vision, that they would touch others and preach the good news of the kingdom. But

before this vision could be realized, we see him calling them to "be with him".

As we follow the disciples from this point on, their training appears a bit chaotic. Christ's teaching and preparation is intensive, but it often seems to be haphazard, designed to shape and mold whatever raw materials life had thrown at them in a given day. What remains consistent, however, is the characteristic of Christ's presence in their lives, and their presence in his. They were "with him", and he "with them."

A colleague of mine likes to remind me that the discipleship activities of Christ, his teaching, leading and shaping, were all set in the frame of life rather than in the frame of a program. This seems like a subtle difference, but the reality is very profound. The container can indeed have a significant impact on the content.

"How can I create the frame of life," we might think, "to place around my discipleship?". It doesn't need to be created, it already exists. In fact, created life is always a bit plastic and inert, bearing none of the pulsing richness of the real thing. You already have a frame of life. You live in the midst of it. Now you need to invite others to be "with you" in it.

For my wife this means talking with a young believer about spiritual things when she is standing at the sink doing the dinner dishes, or SMSing a word of encouragement while she is folding laundry. For me, it means taking Tom with me when I go to speak on a retreat, or studying the book of Philippians in my quiet time with Michael, or sharing openly about my struggles at our Sunday night small group.

This is why discipleship is so hard to describe to someone who has not experienced it. It can take so many forms, yet the common characteristic of "sharing life" remains the same.

Though not explicitly stated in his challenge, the fact that Jesus called these men to be with him meant that he was also with them. We find him in their homes, having dinner with their friends, and even healing their relatives. In entering these environments that were natural to them he brought the transforming impact of his presence and teaching, often marking their worlds in radical and enduring ways.

As you think about the activity of discipling a young person, begin by moving to be "with them" Step into whatever frame of life they currently find themselves. Join them, and then begin to use the raw materials of life to shape and lead them.

Discipleship may take many paths, but it always has the same destination

"Where do I lead them?" we might ask. This is a common roadblock in discipleship, the sense that we don't know exactly what to do. It causes us to latch on to a list from the experts, or try to mimic someone who already displays disciple making fruit.

Rich didn't seem prepared for our meetings. But on the other hand he was. Somehow he always seemed to know where to take me, responding with an almost intuitive sense of what was ahead. How did he know where to lead me and on what basis did he choose the next step?

I live at the foot of a 4000 foot mountain, the highest in our region. It is a favorite destination for hikers, and on the weekends the roads are often clogged with cars, discharging groups of nature lovers for a day on the trail. Because the valley provides many places to start the hike, there are literally scores of paths up the mountain. Each has their unique views and challenges, but all converge at the top, where there is a breathtaking view of the surrounding countryside.

Not long ago my son and I decided to take a jaunt up the peak. Since I had already explored most of the paths on our side of the mountain, we decided to pioneer a new route directly up the face. It was more difficult than most, and involved hundreds of decisions. Should we go to the left of this rock or to the right, around the patch

of bushes or through them. However, at each point it was only necessary to see two things, the terrain directly in front of us, and the top of the peak in the distance. Because the destination was always in view, and our immediate surroundings as well, each decision had a clear context, and the steps forward flowed naturally one right after another.

Because every person begins in a different place, no discipleship path will look exactly the same. What gives the disciple maker a context for choosing the route forward, however, is a clear view of the goal in the distance, coupled with a keen sense of the immediate surroundings.

Paul described this goal in Col 1:28-29. "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone **perfect in Christ**. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." Our goal for every disciple is that the student reach maturity in Christ, that their life begin to look like his. This vision gives our work focus, allowing us to throw everything into the labor with the power of his energy.

An artist was once asked how he learned to carve a piece of stone into a beautiful statue. "You see a square pillar of stone," he said. "But I see a beautiful woman inside of it. As I gaze at the stone I look at her, and then simply chip off what doesn't belong to her form."

Our task is similar. The picture of Christ should always be before us. What doesn't belong to his form needs to be chipped away. Other descriptions of maturity in the Bible can focus our eyes even more clearly on this image. The fruit of the Spirit is a helpful starting place, as are examples of men and women of God in Scripture. These pictures can clarify our view of where we are going, and give us a context for knowing the next step.

Our work has an additional dynamic since what is being formed is living. Part of what we need to provide is the proper conditions for growth - the daily intake of the Word of God, the exercise of obedience, the regular cleansing of repentance. We have access to the shaping power of a community of believers, the nurture of prayer, and the warmth of God's grace and love. All of these can be applied, toward the end of conforming each believer to the image of Christ.

Discipleship flows from who God has made you.

The Word of God is clear that there are a number of different spiritual gifts, but is equally clear that everyone should be involved in the work of disciple making. This means that your disciple making energy will flow through your unique gifting, and out of the natural context of who you are. In that, it will have a unique signature, and a form that is distinct to who you are and how God has put you together.

When the disciples were given the task of feeding the 5000, their attention immediately went to what they did not have. They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" (Mark 6:37) It was a useless discussion, full of frustration and doubt. Though it was easy to picture how this sum of money would meet the needs of the people, their assessment was an exercise in futility. You can't give Christ something that you don't have.

On the other hand, when they engaged what they did possess in meeting the needs of the people, somehow it was multiplied and the stomachs filled. It is easy in disciple making for our gaze to drift to what we do not have or to what we wish were true. We don't have enough time, or energy, or resources, or talent. It is easy to picture how everything could be different, if the missing elements we needed were somehow available.

This is an exercise in futility. You can't give someone what you don't have. But you can step out in faith and invest what you do possess, asking the Lord to break it, bless it and multiply it.

My wife doesn't have the gift of teaching. She disciplines through the gifts of encouragement and prayer. I on the

other hand, don't have the gift of administration. But I can disciple by leading and teaching. I know a woman who discipled through the gift of hospitality, and another who visits ladies and helps them organize their homes. She has the gift of service, and God most powerfully uses her to shape others when the two of them are elbow deep in the back closet, bringing the world back into order.

God will also use our unique talents and experiences. Todd has discipled many with a basketball in one hand and a Bible in the other. It is a natural combination for a Moody Bible School graduate who was also an all American athlete. Victor discipled around a pool table in his front room, Cari through her uncanny knack for conversation and mastery of the fine art of hanging around.

The key is an engagement of all we are in the disciple making process. Whatever God has built into you, bring it to bear in expectation that God will use it. Learn your unique style and become comfortable with it. Trust that the resources he gave you are an expression of his wisdom. He wants you say with Paul "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." (I Thess 1:8)

Discipleship is not complete until the student becomes a teacher.

My favorite work by Dawson Trotman is a slim pamphlet titled, "Born to Reproduce". It is a power-packed piece with just one main thought -nothing is fully mature until it begins to reproduce. This must be kept in mind even when a believer is still a spiritual infant, Trotman argues. One day they too will need to impart Christ's life to others. Every step forward from birth needs to prepare them to reproduce.

The power of this thought is even understood in the business world. In the training process at McDonalds restaurants workers are not just instructed in how to flip a hamburger, but simultaneously taught how to **teach** someone to flip a hamburger. Those who learn with a view to pass on their skills to others have a much higher mastery over the material covered.

Jesus sent his disciples out to serve without him. He warned them they would need at some point to carry the message on their own. The path would be a dead end if Christ just recruited students. A disciple was prepared from the beginning to make other disciples, who in turn made other disciples, who made still more disciples. And so the gospel reached you and me.

I'm still convinced there is no better model for spreading the Kingdom of God.

Works cited

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