[You Don’t Understand the First Thing About Discipleship](https://jimegli.com/you-dont-understand-the-first-thing-about-discipleship/" \l "more-1141)

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I hate to tell you this, but you don’t understand the first thing about discipleship.

I was the same way. I had taught and written about discipleship for thirty years, and discipled many people both one-on-one and in small cadres. But recently I realized that my primary assumption about discipleship was wrong.

What am I talking about? I always thought that discipleship should immediately follow someone’s coming to Christ. In other words, I thought that discipleship *followed* evangelism. But I was wrong. Discipleship actually begins *before* someone comes to Christ! This is the biblical model. It is the one that works best. And, when we make this paradigm shift it changes everything.

While it’s true that someone who comes to Christ should be discipled—and I co-authored a great book for this, *Beginning the Journey*, that has sold over 100,000 copies in English and been translated into many languages—underneath this is a flawed assumption. Discipleship ideally does not *follow* evangelism. Discipleship actually begins *before* someone’s coming to Christ.

Let’s begin by looking at this biblically, and then we will look at it practically.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus’ ministry begins in 1:15, as he declares, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Immediately after this, in verse 17, he begins gathering disciples on the seashore, challenging Peter, Andrew, James and John: “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Think about it: Were these guys born again when they started to follow Jesus as his disciples? I think you’d have to agree that they were not. It was 7 chapters later that they begin to realize that he was the Messiah and even then they are pretty confused about what that meant. (Mark 8:27-33) And, it was not until the day of Pentecost, 3 years later, that the Holy Spirit invaded and changed their lives. Notice, however, that long before they recognize Jesus as the Messiah and years before their lives are transformed by the Holy Spirit, they have already been following Jesus and doing their best to obey him. Their discipleship began long *before* their conversion.

The same thing is true today. Almost always people begin to enter into Christian community and start to follow Jesus in small ways before they fully give their lives to him. As they learn to obey him, they discover that he is good and real and trustworthy, and—having experienced him for themselves—they put their full trust in him as Savior and Lord.

People, so often, belong before they believe. They begin to obey before they fully surrender.

This is not a perfect analogy but it’s kind of like dating and getting married. If you are married consider this question: Did you begin to love and serve your partner before or after you committed your life to them in marriage? Undoubtably, you began serving them and caring about them *before* your no-turning-back commitment to them. In the same way, people begin to follow Jesus, going deeper in their love and obedience, before fully trusting in him.

The key difference that this makes in practical terms is that we are not just looking for new believers to disciple. We are looking for people that God is drawing, people that have a real hunger for him, even if right now their lives are a mess and they haven’t yet trusted in Christ as their Lord and Savior. These people can and should start to obey Jesus and even help draw others to him while they are still on their journey toward him.

When we have this approach both our evangelism and our discipleship become more effective, more biblical, and more fruitful. We can quit trying to get people that hardly know Jesus to make an all out commitment to him, and start inviting them to obey and serve him in their daily lives in small but real ways. As they do, they will discover Jesus is good, gracious, and powerful, and then in time they can gladly and fully surrender their lives to him.

When I look back on my life, I should have realized this a lot sooner. I remember when the first edition of *Beginning the Journey* came out twenty years ago that my boss, Randall Neighbour, said, “Jim, this is a great book. I am not using it with new believers. I am working through it with a couple of unbelievers, two Chinese newlyweds who want to know more about what it means to follow Jesus.” And it worked. These seekers eventually gave their lives to Christ and were wonderfully transformed by him.

The first thing that you need to understand about discipleship is that it isn’t just for believers. In fact, it works best when it begins with unbelievers. God is at work in lives all around you. Some people that appear very far from him may be the very ones God is calling you to invest in and to love into his kingdom in the months or years ahead.

Are you making disciples who make disciples? Who is God calling you to invest your life in right now? Look around you. Who has a hunger for God? Who is asking questions? Who is God putting on your heart? Invite them to look at the Bible with you to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus day-by-day.

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