

What is discipleship?

Excerpt from 'Facilitator's Manual'

Go and make people from all nations into disciples, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you

— Jesus, Matthew 28:19-20

Discipleship is the process of making disciples who themselves will also make other disciples. In a family where there is no birth there will be no continuity, so a church without disciples will not live for a long time. However, all church members are not disciples, yet the very objective is to make every believer a disciple. A mere believer is far from a disciple.

— Burkinabé Pastor, 2010

What is the primary principle of discipleship?

I believe it is set forth most clearly by the missionary apostle, Paul, when he writes these words in his second letter addressed to his own disciple, Timothy. Words that contain a clear echo of Jesus' words, in Matthew 28.

Keep safe the great treasure that has been entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us... and the things you heard from me, which were supported by many witnesses, these commit to faithful people, such as will be competent to teach others.

2 Timothy 1.14 and 2.2

Here we encounter two vital aspects of discipleship. Firstly, Paul's exhortation that the knowledge of the Messiah is not simply human knowledge or philosophy. It is a spiritual treasure, to be entrusted to faithful followers. Secondly, this spiritual treasure must be kept safe with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Safe-keeping

This safe-keeping does not mean keeping the treasure hidden away somewhere. Rather, this treasure, this intimate knowledge of the Messiah, is to be kept safe by carefully committing it to the stewardship and safekeeping of others. Paradoxically, it is this committing of the treasure to others that keeps it safe. That keeps it from becoming unproductive.

Let us seek to understand this more deeply. The metaphor of seed and the harvest that comes from seed that is sown will be central throughout this process of discipleship. Seeds are usually only stored for a short time before being used. Whatever is not used for food, is sown in order to produce another harvest.

Here in Africa, you know that seed is a form of wealth. It is a type of treasure. And that seed is both shared and sown. In this way a natural harvest is reaped from seed sown into the ground and a spiritual harvest is reaped from friends, family and community with whom you share your harvest, your 'daily bread.'

In the same way, the Holy Spirit's help is encountered not in hoarding the treasure of his life and his communion with us, but in sowing and sharing it with others, both within and beyond our own community.

Like natural seed, this treasure is not to be given or cast away carelessly. It is too precious to be wasted in any way. It is not to be wasted upon those who do not appreciate its value and will not use it wisely. What is received must be shared with other faithful people. People who will also keep safe this treasure, sowing it in good soil, sharing it with other faithful people ... who in turn, share it with other faithful people ... and so on ... and so on.

In this way, a discipleship movement begins to take place.

A movement of disciples

Discipleship was at the heart of the Messiah Jesus' life and work. Today's worldwide Christian movement began with one small, core group of disciples, formed around him.

Discipleship movements have the potential to change the world. Leaders, money, books and power all have their places within radical movements. But, in a world in which people are continually effected by corporate experiences larger than any individual, it is people-movements that produce deep, wide, enduring change.

Two things are essential to transformative people movements: (i) vision and (ii) discipleship. Visionary leaders must impart a hope that is powerful, challenging and instrumental. A vision capable of gripping the hearts of others and turning them into faithful, active disciples...

Disciples committed to producing a significant transformation. Disciples willing to work endlessly to turn vision into reality. Disciples who pursue their work as visionary co-workers, rather than selfishly-ambitious individuals. Disciples who reproduce other faithful, active disciples, by continually sharing the work, values and hopes of the vision.

In this way a movement is developed. A movement of focussed, visionary, dynamic people. People deeply and profoundly allied to a vision, a cause and a purpose that is larger than themselves.

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During the past two-thousand years, the messianic new-covenant community — the body of the Messiah, the Church — has grown and developed through precisely this sort of dynamism. From its origins as an obscure, tiny, Jewish sect it has grown into an international, intercultural, multi-ethnic community now existing, in some way or other, in practically every nation of the world.

As this community has spread out, it has significantly transformed the history of many of those nations and it will transform many more in the days and years that are ahead. This dynamism can be traced to the Christian community operating as a movement of disciples, continually spreading out across geographical, social, ethnic, linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Cessation of movement

Nevertheless, in certain seasons, in certain places, this dynamic movement has ceased to exist. A church planted within a nation or culture, in a former season, is no longer growing and multiplying.

Inevitably, behind religious facades, such a church is marked by a lack of vision, a spirituality devoid of vitality and a character largely unfaithful to its holy roots and traditions. Although such churches typically remain dogmatic towards their creeds, the Christian community no longer exhibits authentic, biblical zeal for its true vocation amongst the nations of the world.

In practice, such a church or community has become un-critical in its engagement with the societies and cultures in which it lives. Its testimony compromised by idolatrous values. Its lifestyle accommodated to ungodly influences. It has ceased to be different, ceased to be transformative, ceased to make any discernible impact upon its social, material, political and cultural environments.

In this case, the church has ceased to be a movement. Invariably, it has ceased making disciples. It lacks the confidence required to persuade either itself or others to forsake human idols and to affirm wholehearted allegiance towards the Messiah.

Renewal

By contrast, whenever a national church, local congregation or Christian leader seeks for spiritual formation, renewal, reformation or revival, Christian discipleship must form the core of its activities.

Disciples must be invited, formed and sent forth as part of a world-facing movement. The goal is much greater than bolstering the church-as-an-organisation, greater even than serving the church-as-community. The goal is to be part of a movement of people serving God's purposes within the world and its societies.

At its core, the messianic, new-covenant community is a movement of disciples called to serve God's eternal purpose, amongst a world of lost, hurting, confused, oppressed, fear-filled, idol-bound populations.

Out there, beyond the congregational gatherings, among the corruption of society, among its filthy gutters, behind its social, political and religious walls, Christ is at work by his Spirit. And out there he is calling co-workers ready to be alongside him in his redemption and transformation: of individuals, families, marriages, partnerships, communities, organisations, structures, workplaces and working practices.

Out there is where Christian disciples need to bring the light of Christ. Out there, amongst the people of the world, Christ's disciples are the light of the world.

Anointed community

To make possible such an otherwise impossibly-high calling, Christian discipleship provides a unique ingredient that other philosophies, ideologies and faiths do not and cannot: the dynamic of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

With the Spirit, the new-covenant community becomes a charismatic community. A group of people endowed with spiritual gifts that are profoundly shaped to liberate human beings from idolatry and every other allegiance and falsehood that competes and sets itself against God and the knowledge of him.

'Charismatic' derives from a Greek word, *charism*, meaning gift of the Spirit. Biblically speaking, the charisma of the Christian community derives from its anointing. Messiah—Christ—means Anointed One. The One Anointed with the Spirit.

Thus, the Messianic Community is a body of people anointed with the fragrant 'oil' or presence of the Holy Spirit, having been brought under God's authority, through baptism into the Messiah. A body learning to walk in the footsteps of Jesus: learning to exercise its God-appointed mediatory, intercessory role, under the direction of the Spirit of God.

This community of disciples is a messianic, charismatic people called into covenant relationship with the Father, through the Son and sent into the world to bless the nations in the power of the Spirit.

Life...through death

God's intention is that this covenant community co-works in partnership with him, using the strength, the power, the spiritual life, the anointing that he provides.

Too often though, that power, that anointed-life-of-Christ-within-us, seems to elude us. It seems out of our reach. Out of our grasp.

Indeed, it is not something that can be grasped, as Jesus himself demonstrated (Philippians 2). Instead the pathway to life is through dying. Only to the extent that we die to ourselves, do we truly become alive to God.

So we finish (this section) where we began: recognising the foundational principle of transformative discipleship is that of the seed that does not remain a seed alone, but which is sown into the ground, in order to produce a harvest.

I tell you that unless a grain of wheat that falls to the ground dies, it stays just a grain; but if it dies, it produces a big harvest.

John 12.24

This life-giving spiritual reality is at the heart of Jesus' own life, mission, ministry and pain-filled death. And this same principle forms the foundation and wellspring of this Discipleship Curriculum. As we embrace a practical form of discipleship incorporating a daily dying-to-self, we learn how to truly become alive-to-God.

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