

Getting Serious about Being & Making Disciples

By Dave Detwiler, Pastor of Teaching & Ceremonies, BranchCreek Community Church – September 2004

What do you want your life to be all about? What legacy do you want to leave behind? According to the Bible, our greatest privilege and highest calling in life is to respond to Jesus' gracious call to follow him as our Savior and God, and to help others do the same. In other words, the most fulfilling life we can live and the most significant legacy we can leave have to do with being and making disciples of Jesus.

Famous last words: Matthew 28:18-20

Our Lord could hardly have been clearer about this: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

But is this the vision that we are intentionally pursuing in our lives? Are we consumed with being and making disciples?

What exactly is a disciple of Jesus?

You may be thinking, "Aren't Jesus' disciples those twelve guys who followed him around back in the first century?" Yes, but if you track this term in the New Testament, you'll discover that every single person who made a commitment to follow Jesus—even after he left the earth—is called his disciple. Later, those same people are called *Christians* (see Acts 11:26). So, a disciple is simply a Christian—a person who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed him as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following him. But how do we know if such a relationship is for real?

The marks of true disciples of Jesus

First, *true disciples will hold to Jesus' teaching*. To those who claimed to believe him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." (John 8:31). Now, don't misunderstand Jesus here. He is *not* saying that true disciples will perfectly obey him. Peter, of all people, miserably failed his Lord at times (Matt 26:69-75 and Gal 2:11-21); and John was fully aware that Christians would sometimes fall into sin (1 John 1:8-2:2). However, Jesus *is* saying that if we are truly his disciples, our lives will be increasingly characterized by knowing and doing what he says about life.

Second, *true disciples will love one another*. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Again, as true disciples, we won't be perfect in this area either, but we should see our love for others continually growing (2 Thess 1:3).

Third, and finally, *true disciples will bear fruit in their lives*. Jesus declared, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). This includes the fruit of godly character (Gal 5:22-26), the fruit of living right and doing good in God's eyes (Phil 1:11; Col 1:10), and the fruit of leading others to eternal life in Christ (John 4:34-38; 15:16). Just as we will get apples from apple trees, we will see Christlike character and conduct growing in our lives if we are truly following Christ (Luke 6:40).

So why are we not seeing these things?

All of this sounds great, but are we actually seeing these marks in our lives? Are we increasingly holding to Jesus' teaching, loving one another, and bearing fruit? If not, why not? And, further, are we actively helping others to grow as true disciples of Jesus?

I'm convinced that churches today are filled with people who truly love God and desire to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, but very few of these people are at a place of spiritual maturity where they are consistently modeling Christlikeness and actively helping others to grow as committed followers of Jesus. Why is that? Jesus said that the church should be full of vibrant, growing, reproducing disciples, but this is seldom the case. What gives?

Rethinking the process of discipleship

If you think about it, discipleship, which is simply the ongoing process of growth as a disciple, will only be successful when we create an environment where people can really grow. Greg Ogden, in *Transforming Discipleship*, argues that what we need are "hothouses" for Christian growth. He elaborates: "Hothouses maximize the environmental conditions so that living things can grow at a rate greater than would exist under normal conditions."

So, what are the climatic conditions that enable us to experience significant growth in our lives? Ogden has identified three, and puts it this way: When we (1)

open our hearts in transparent trust to each other (2) around the truth of God's Word (3) in the spirit of mutual accountability, we are in the Holy Spirit's hothouse of transformation."

If Ogden is right about these conditions (and I think he is), where do we experience all three? In our weekend worship gatherings? While these vital times encourage us to worship God and learn from his Word (2, above), they nevertheless fail to provide much of an opportunity for transparent trust (1) and mutual accountability (3). The same holds true for classes, seminars, or even reading. Small groups do provide such an opportunity, but they are not always focused on Bible study, nor do they always reach a point where people are really opening up to each other and holding each other accountable so that significant spiritual growth can occur.

The power of a discipleship triad

One context that often leads to significant spiritual growth is the one-on-one relationship (often referred to as "discipling," although the term applies beyond this context). However, Ogden identifies some significant limitations here as well:

1. The discipler carries the responsibility for the spiritual welfare of another. This pressures the discipler to perform and be the focal point.
2. The one-on-one relationship sets up a hierarchy that tends to result in dependency.
3. One-on-one relationships limit the interchange or dialogue.
4. This relationship often does not reproduce.

With this in mind, and after almost 20 years of careful research on what makes for successful discipleship, Ogden has concluded that, "we need to change from a hierarchical approach that creates dependency to a peer mentoring model that has much more promise of empowering multiplication." What he has discovered is that the ideal size for a disciple-making group is three (a "triad"), and here's why:

1. There is a shift from unnatural pressure to natural participation of the discipler. The discipler in this setting is a fellow participant, not resident authority.
2. There is a shift from hierarchical to relational. The triad creates a come-alongside mutual journey. The focus is not so much upon the discipler as it is upon Christ as the one toward whom all are directing their lives.
3. There is a shift from limited input to wisdom in numbers. And the intimacy inherent in a triad means that everybody will be contributing.
4. There is a shift from addition to multiplication, as triads reproduce (and they do reproduce!).

"In summary," Ogden writes, "a triad encourages multiplication because it minimizes the hierarchical dimensions and maximizes a peer mentoring model. By providing a discipleship curriculum specifically designed for this intimate relationship [he has created such a resource called, *Discipleship Essentials*], it creates a simple, reproducible structure that almost any growing believer can lead. Leadership in these groups can be rotated early on, since the size makes for an informal interchange and the curriculum provides a guide to follow."

Some important clarifications

First of all, *we're not talking about a program here; we're talking about relationships.* Ogden drives this point home for us:

1. Discipling relationships are marked by intimacy, whereas programs tend to focus on information.
2. Discipling relationships involve full, mutual responsibility of the participants, whereas programs have one or a few who do on behalf of the many.
3. Discipling relationships are customized to the unique growth process of the individuals, whereas programs emphasize getting through the provided material in a set amount of time.
4. Discipling relationships focus accountability around life change, whereas programs focus accountability around content. Growth into Christlikeness is the ultimate goal.

Second, *successful discipling relationships take time.* Again, Ogden's words are helpful: "By giving relationship priority, we need to change our short-cut approaches to making disciples. This means having enough vision to think small." Consider the example of Jesus: he spent three years investing in a few men.

Finally, *the genders should be kept separate in a discipling relationship.* Because of the intimacy of a triad, where people are learning to open up to each other on a deep level, same-sex groups are best. Plus, as Ogden notes, "in an intense spiritual environment heart wires can get crossed. Spiritual passion can easily cross over to sexual passion."

Interested? Want to know more about triads?

Check out Ogden's book, *Transforming Discipleship*, or contact me (dave.detwiler@branchcreek.org) as we are "test-flying" this discipleship model through our Encounter small group this fall.

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ" – Colossians 1:28