

Discipleship

The New Testament has a lot to say about discipleship. A disciple was a person who bound themselves to someone else to acquire their practical and theoretical knowledge. This disciple may have been an apprentice in a trade, a student of medicine or a member of a philosophical school. Whereas students made a voluntary decision to become a disciple of their masters, with Jesus it was different. He gave a decisive call to chosen individuals. The disciples He chose lived with Him for over three years and during that time He had significant input into their lives.

The last command of Jesus was for His followers to go into all the world and make disciples.

'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.' Matthew 28:19

Therefore, when a person becomes a Christian this should also become the commencement of a life of discipleship.

The effect of discipleship

The making of disciples can be done by addition or multiplication. Let me illustrate this. If a pastor was to win a person to Christ every six months and then teach that person to win another person to Christ within six months, then after one year there will be four Christians. If through outreach they continue to lead people to Christ every six months and train others to do the same, then at the end of two years there will be 16 Christians. At the end of five years there will be 1,048 believers, while after fifteen and a half years there will be 2.176 billion believers! However, if a pastor is the only one bringing people to Christ every six months, then after fifteen and half years there will only be 32 believers. What a difference!

The Apostle Paul in writing to Timothy brings out the process of discipleship:

'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.' 2 Timothy 2:2.

So then, we have the responsibility of making disciples, who in turn will train others.

Paul ⇒ Timothy ⇒ reliable men ⇒ others

The possibilities for growth are tremendous if we follow through on Paul's instruction. Most of my time as a pastor is spent in training my leaders who in turn train and disciple others. On the other hand, I still try and spend significant time with new Christians and those who are about to make that decision to follow Christ. The former task is described at the end of the chapter.

Discipling the new believer

Give a ring or call in the next day or two after a decision has been made to accept Christ as Saviour. Ask how they are feeling about their decision and say you would love to help them learn more about this important step they have taken. Ask if it is okay to take a regular Bible study with them. If not show your willingness to be a friend and get in touch the following week. If yes proceed with the following:

1. Meet once a week for about one hour of training. Choose a time day or night which is convenient for you both. You may need to meet with them for several months or even years. Time will tell.
2. Encourage them to contact you at any time they need to. Be a good friend.
3. Have some social occasions with them, for example, playing sports, having coffee together.
4. During the training time:
 - Enquire as to how their week has been.
 - Spend time going through a Bible study guide or incorporate an inductive Bible study approach where you go through a book or passage of the Bible together. In an inductive approach you may ask the following questions:
 - a. What does it say?
 - b. Is there anything I do not understand?
 - c. How does it apply to me?

Seek to cover basic doctrines of the Bible (not just your pet themes).
Videos are also useful for teaching.

- Pray for each other. A new Christian might find this embarrassing so be sensitive to where they are at. Recognise you can be as blessed by this new relationship as they will be.
- Encourage them to join a place of worship, but do not rush it.
- Encourage them to share their faith with others. They often have wonderful contacts which are ripe for evangelism.

Do not impose upon them a set of rules or regulations. Have a loving attitude toward them and prepare for disappointment as well as success. Do not come on heavy. Respect their privacy and individuality.

Follow-up department

It is useful to have someone who has a list of those willing to disciple others and a sense of the importance of Follow-up. This coordinator should be familiar with different Follow-up booklets and willing if necessary to show the discipler how to follow up. With assistance they can decide on who to match up with whom.

Every couple of weeks the coordinator should contact the discipler to check on progress and to give encouragement if necessary. Any difficult cases can be referred to the pastor for prayer and advice.

A basic record card can prove helpful in monitoring the progress of the person being disciplined. A more detailed system would record the topics covered in the Bible studies and the date of their baptism.

If there is a shortage of people to disciple on a one-to-one basis, we have found at times that a group of new believers meeting weekly has proved useful. That way the new believers grow together.

Discipling those with leadership potential

It is important to pray about who you should spend time with. Jesus stayed up all night before he chose His disciples. It is particularly important that pastors disciple future leaders as people who will catch our vision and spirit.

Most of what we pass on will be "caught" not taught and that means spending time together. Give teaching sessions regarding leadership issues and 'modelling' (teaching by example) in high learning situations. Give responsibilities where suitable.

I have generally given discipling times to several people at one time and have not informed them of the purpose I might have in mind for them at the end of the training sessions. The group training dispels any jealousy that might be directed towards an individual who is openly being trained by the pastor, avoiding any embarrassing premature commitments if significant weaknesses show up. This also lessens the pressure on the learner to try to match up to his mentor's expectations.

Group training is better in that it does not produce clones of the disciples. The main issues are discussed in a more natural way with a group who can talk about their experiences.

Subjects covered should include such things as listening skills, learning to think win/win in situations, living inter dependently, plus other topics covered in the manual.