

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.

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. Some 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

Within a day or two after a person has decided to accept Christ as their Saviour, give them a phone call or visit them. Ask how they are feeling about the decision they have made and express your desire to help them grow in their new faith. Explain that you would be pleased to meet with them regularly to study the Bible together and ask if they would be comfortable with that. If they are not ready, reassure them that you would still like to remain in touch as a friend, and arrange to contact them again the following week. (You may of course delegate this to someone else trained in that area).

If they are willing, proceed with the following steps:

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 etc.
4. During the training time:
 - Enquire as to how their week has been.
 - Spend time going through a Bible study guide or use 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.
- Right from the beginning 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 in a legalistic way in following Christ. Have a loving attitude toward them and sensitively prepare them for some disappointments as well as successes. Encourage them to enjoy God. 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 may 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 you follow this approach, make sure you do not breach confidentiality.

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

Pastors should also give special attention to discipling those who demonstrate leadership potential. As they spend time together, these emerging leaders are more likely to embrace not only the pastor's vision for the church, but also their heart, values, and spirit of ministry. Such intentional mentoring helps prepare faithful leaders who will serve Christ effectively and, in turn, disciple others.