Reflections in Acts: Reestablishing Discipleship a the Pathway to a Mature Body of Believers
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Jerry Nelson

At the core of the Great Commission is the call to intentional discipleship. Once a person has received Christ, confessing him as Lord and Savior, then what? It is at this point that the church, particularly in the 20th and now 21st century, has been slow to figure out. The breakdown between salvation and discipleship can be traced back to the advent of the community school, which initially was intended be a stop gap for parents who did not assume their responsibility for discipling their kids. However, as the popularity of the community school grow, it inadvertently created, in the minds of most Americans, a separation between our salvation (church/moral life) and education (our intellectual pursuits). The chasm that has been created has been very difficult to bridge ever since. The church has suffered greatly because many Christians are not able to understand the connection between the spiritual pursuits and their career/academic/intellectual pursuits. The Puritans, who established many of our great universities, understood the connection between their salvation and all of life. In their mind, there was no separation between church and state, secular and spiritual. For them, all of life was sacred; therefore all of it was to be brought under the authority of God. As the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10.5, "We are to take every thought captive for Christ…"

Obviously, this has been very difficult for the Christians of the 21st century as we are all bombarded with thoughts and ideas that overtly complete with the commands of God. How is it that most Christians in America profess to be Christians, while our society becomes increasingly godless? At the core of this may be a failure to produce true Disciples of Christ.

Discipleship Theory: The Factor vs. The Laboratory

What’s the best approach to discipleship? Is it more “factory” or more “laboratory?” A factory operates under the premise that they have a product that they will manufacture to a particular specification, assuming that those who need the item will only need that particular specification. Typically factories are bottom-line driven. It is about efficiency. While quality is determine by how efficient the factory can turn out a product according to the predetermined specification, and maintain the relative usability of the product. Where as in a laboratory, experiments and tests are common place to in order to determine the “best combinations” or “fit” for a specific situation. It can be likened to handcrafting by a master craftsman for a master user. In this case quality is total end-user driven. It is the difference between, “Here is something, I hope it works for you!” versus “Let’s see what you need and make something just right for it.” In our present day culture we equate discipleship with going through a program or a series of classes. While this may produce a collective consciousness and produce a common language, it does not necessarily mean that people are being effectively discipled. In other words, true discipleship should not be defined by how long you have been in church or how many Christian video courses you have watched. However, in true discipleship their will be a large degree of imitation, duplication, and replication, but its certain not a one-size-fits-all process.

What is discipleship?

Discipleship is the process of demonstrating Christ-like qualities in everyday life through a delicate combination of leadership (visible example), testimony (past example), and direct instruction. At
the core of discipleship is the disciple’s relationship to the discipler. True discipleship is transference of values acquired, mostly, through visible example while the direct instruction is the commentary. Discipleship typically breaks down when the visible example does not match the direct instruction (the commentary). The master discipler is one whose visible example matches their direct instruction. Discipleship is the embodying of our salvation and making it effectual, in other words, working it out with fear and trembling. It begins with understanding that all of life is sacred, because it all belongs to God. (Philippians 2.12).

Master Disciplers

The genius of scripture is that the largest portion of it is written in narrative form. Therefore, we are not only privileged to hear the words of these great men and women of the faith, but we are able to hear them in the context in which they spoke them. So, when we listen to the words of Christ, Peter, Paul and the like, we are able to feel the force of their words, because we able to see the content of character. These are men who spoke out of their experiences, as Peter exclaimed on several occasions, “We are all witnesses” to what God has done and therefore desired to transfer what they had experienced to others, that they may experience it as well. As these great disciplers worked out their salvation with fear and trembling, applying what their teachers taught them, they gained experience, increasing their testimony, which in turn gives weight to their message.

Paul the Master Discipler: By Word, By Action

While Paul dedicated his time to preaching the word of God, he was very conscious and concerned about the progress each of the established churches and their disciples were making in the faith. Paul was a master discipler in that he was not merely concerned with the salvation of new converts, but mostly with their spiritual growth. His desire to see each believer and their connection in the body of Christ mature and be strengthen is best summed up in his farewell speech to the Ephesian Elders:

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock…Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (20.28-32)

Paul was aware of the challenges the elders would face, which he told them in no uncertain terms. However, he left an example for them to follow, just like Christ did and it was in the strength of his example that his teaching and his testimony had power.

Discipleship is Characterized by a Thirst for the Knowledge of God

- Acts 13.42-43 “—urged them to continue in grace"
We see in this passage that once the formal service was finished, there were still those who wanted to hear more from Paul and Barnabas and they did not refuse. The disciples followed Paul and Barnabas and they were ready to pour into their life. More importantly, we see that they pointed them to develop their faith in the Lord. What we also see, is that the people in Pisidian Antioch were thirsting for knowledge thus their continual desire to hear more from Paul and Barnabas.

Discipleship Takes Courage

• Acts 4.22 “–[They strengthened and encouraged the disciples] to remain true to the faith.”

This passage is very unique for it speaks to the quality of Paul as a master discipler. Prior to this statement Paul visited Antioch and Iconium where he fearlessly preached the Gospel and experienced fierce opposition resulting in the missionaries expulsion from the region. (v.13.50). Then traveling to Lystra, Paul experienced his fiercest persecution yet: He is stoned so badly, that his persecutors thought he was dead and drug him out of the city. Paul survived and recovered enough to return to those same cities that persecuted him, for the singularly reason of strengthening and encouraging those whom he converted and affirmed on those first trips, but to also comfort them by letting them know that he was fine. The disciples in the regions he returned to were sure to see the bruises all over his body and wondered why he would return to the very place he experienced such persecution. It was at this moment that we see the heart of Paul as it is transferred to his disciples through these words: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” (v.14.22). It was these words that gave context to all the difficulties he had experienced and served as a mental balm to the disciple’s enflamed dispositions.

Discipleship Requires Follow Up and Encouragement

• Acts15.36 “–Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.”
• Acts 15.41 – He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”
• Acts18.23 “–Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.”
• Acts 20.1 “–Paul sent for the disciples…encouraging them…”

After visiting with the Jerusalem Council, Paul consults with Barnabas about revisiting the believers in all of the towns they had preached the word of God. Verse 15.36 can be tied to 14.22 and affirms Paul’s desire to see that all of the believers grow in Christ and remain encouraged in their faith. Therefore, in the case of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, this would be Paul’s third time making a trip through these hostile territories to insure first and foremost that the believers are growing in the faith and that they are not being lead by false teachings. If any, we know that Christianity is difficult. It is not that we don’t know what the word of God says about its struggles; sometimes we just need the encouragement to stay the course.

Discipleship Take Place Everywhere/Not Limited to the Walls of the Church

• Acts 6.40 “…they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them…”
Following Paul and Silas’ imprisonment and wrongful public beaten (reminiscent of v.14.22) they returned to Lydia’s house where they met with fellow believers in Christ and Luke tells us that they encouraged them. Discipleship is not limited to the walls of the church, but transcends all establishments and moves and flows along with its participants. In addition, there is a certain efficacy when discipleship occurs in a place of comfort and peace. It enhances the transference of information.

Discipleship Takes (A lot of) Time

- Acts 18.11 “—Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.”
- Acts 20.31 “—Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears
- Acts 28.31 “—For two whole years…He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

After Paul receives encouragement of his own from the Holy Spirit and the promise that he would not experience persecution in Corinth, he continued his fearless preaching and discipling for another year and a half. Subsequently, we see that he was granted the same favor while he was in Ephesus where he spent three years. In his farewell address to the Ephesian Elders, we are able to see the deep bond and connection that Paul established with them, repeating his message to them again, urging them to remain true to the faith. We also see that the places in which Paul spent the greatest among of time, he had the deepest affection and them for him; and this relationship allowed him to rebuke them if necessary. Providentially, it was his imprisonment in Rome from which we receive some of the greatest doctrinal treatises on the nature and works of Christ and the nature and responsibility of the believer yet strung together with love, affection, and deep concern.

Implications for the 21st Century Church

Based on the testimony of Scripture, what can today’s church do to produce the type of believers that were indicative of the first century? Here are some suggestions:

Realize the first century discipleship model transcend all times, cultures, and places.

The major difference between Paul’s time and ours is just that: time. The principles for discipleship, however, have not changed at all. We must embrace these principles and put them into practice.

One-to-One Discipleship is the Most Effectual

The best way to transfer values is to have someone see it lived out. It is most effectual when a disciple has the humility to allow someone to speak into his or her life and equally the discipler has the courage to rebuke and correct where the disciple veers from the path. This requires, for those who are mature in the faith, to active seek opportunities to poor into the lives of young adults and stick with them through difficult times encouraging them even when they do things contrary to what you have taught them. At best, group disciple creates a singular consciousness, however our individual needs are too vast to be limited to a period of less than an hour, once per week. (Titus 2.3)
Realize Discipleship is a Gritty Thankless Essential Part of the Churches Growth

How else will immature believers become mature unless the mature believer disciples them. We must remember that the quality of discipleship is relative to the quality of the participant’s relationship to each other. If the relationship isn’t there, then true discipleship will not take place. If the relationship exists, then transference of values will occur. Again, the discipler must commit both time and resources to the process and see those placed in their care as ordained by God, and are therefore responsible for their spiritual development. We all must do our part and the church will mature in the Lord.

Discipleship begins at Home

Realizing that we live in a paradigm were the nuclear family does not seems to be the norm, we must still do our best to ensure we set good examples for our kids. Ensuring that the faith we profess, matches the life that we live. However, if the Spirit should lead us to invest time and resources in someone outside of our family, then so be it, as long as it is not at the expense of our family. Whatever values we desire to see our kids possess we should model them at home. Of course, the best values are those that are listed as the Beatitudes and the Fruit of the Spirit. Everything else is preferential and secondary when compared to this list.

Christian Schools assist the Local Church and Home

Assuming that the local church is taking seriously their call to make disciples, the Christian school has the unique role of assisting the local body of believers in fulfilling the great commission. Christian schools can not take the place of the church nor the home in terms of spiritual responsibility and authority, but it can be an effective evangelistic and discipling agent to see that a community hears the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord and through the convicting, indwelling, and leading of the Holy Spirit it comes under the full authority of his Lordship. Our schools hold a unique opportunity to help reestablish the connection between discipleship and the maturity of the body of believers. How shall we then fulfill this mandate and challenge?