

What In the “Word” Is Discipling?

Two pastors talking over lunch:

“What’s the most exciting thing happening in your church?”

“Unquestionably it is our discipling ministry. God is doing tremendous things. You can’t imagine the enthusiasm being stirred by this new program.”

“What do you mean by a discipling ministry?”

“You know. You know what discipling is, don’t you?”

“I guess what I mean is, what do you mean by discipling?”

At least ten separate usages attach themselves to the word “discipling”.

- (1) Perhaps the most technical, and the least used, definition comes from church growth catalyst, Donald McGavran. McGavran uses discipling to refer to the conversion of groups of people. People with common characteristics, interests, or backgrounds come to Christ because of social and religious influences.
- (2) Some employ discipling as a catchall or a blanket term. All the ministries of a local church constitute discipling. One minister said, “Everything we do from cradle roll to weddings and funerals is discipling.” Discipling, in this sense, is equivalent to the word ministry.
- (3) Discipling is also a substitute for the word evangelism. The persuasive influence of a Christian upon an unbeliever defines discipling. This explanation oversimplifies the definition, however.
- (4) Some call discipling a Christian witness’ contacts prior to a person’s decision to accept Christ.
- (5) Others would insist discipling is the decision of the unbeliever to serve God. In other words, when an unbeliever becomes a believer, a Christian has effectively disciplined that person.
- (6) The follow-up process is called “discipling”. Differences of opinion surface as to length of time. Follow-up can last for a few weeks (usually until certain Bible lessons are completed), months, a year, or 3 years (because Jesus took that length of time).
- (7) Others maintain discipling (the follow-up process) is accomplished when the person joins the church or leads someone else to Christ. Those two instances become “mission accomplished.”
- (8) Still others argue, “Discipling lasts a lifetime. Christians must never stop growing.” In this case, discipling is synonymous with maturing or sanctification.

(9) Training people in personal evangelism is thought to be discipling, too. Matthew 28:19-20 gives support to this concept. Teaching Christians how to effectively evangelize an unbeliever constituted much of Jesus' ministry to His disciples.

(10) Developing people to be leaders in the church is also called discipling. Pastors develop program to enhance the ability of the laity to administer and to coordinate various ministries of the local church.

Beyond the definition of discipling, the process of how a person becomes a disciple has various expressions, too. For some, a disciple is one who completes a prescribed curriculum. The curriculum may be a six-week course to a three-year theological and biblical study. The disciple graduates from the classroom upon mastery of the established course requirements.

Discipling is also thought to take place when one person spiritually cultivates another person – "one on one". This interpersonal relationship may consist of a prescribed course of study or it might be a very dynamic and flexible approach to spiritual concerns. The latter approach to discipling may very well be described as counseling.

Others insist discipling involves a group process, usually involving some form of Bible study. The groups may consist of three to fifteen persons, although some leaders purport to minister to 30 to 50 persons at one time. The larger groups would seem to fit with teaching in a classroom situation, whereas the small group of 15 or less would allow group dynamics to have a greater influence in the lives of the participants.

Considering these definitions and differing viewpoints, what in the Word is discipling? This article does not claim to have distilled all of the New Testament to serve as a guideline for adopting an standard for the word "discipling". However, an overview of the Gospel of Matthew offers insights into the process by which Jesus disciplined the twelve.

1. Jesus' relationship with his disciples produced character.

Christ's method and message always centered on people. He helped them to understand themselves and what they were to do. He affirmed positive character qualities in His disciples. He did not hesitate to point out growing weaknesses that inevitably resulted in spiritual impotency and in problems one with another.

Nathaniel is an example. Upon being introduced to Nathaniel, Jesus complimented him on his openness and integrity, saying, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (John 1:47). Jesus shaped Nathaniel's self-concept, affirming this attribute. Jesus developed character in these men. He, then, expected certain

results. The intended outcome was based on who the man was in character and attitude.

2. Jesus taught the kingdom to His disciples. Jesus was a transparent person with His followers.

While some of the happenings in His life occurred in solitude (e.g., the wilderness temptation), Jesus shared those experiences with the twelve.

Discipleship is commonly thought to be Bible study. Discipleship is the study of the Word – the person of Jesus. Jesus spent very little time teaching His disciples the Old Testament. His teaching about the new covenant came out of His life.

Jesus taught the principles of life in the new kingdom. These principles were later illustrated in the actual life experiences of Jesus and His disciples as they ate, worshipped, and mingled with the religious leaders, commoners, and government authorities. There was little question in the minds of the disciples as to what it meant to love one's enemies, to seek the kingdom first, or to build on rock instead of sand. His teaching was plain to Christ's followers, because He lived what He preached.

Nevertheless, some of the lectures and parables of Jesus were obscure to the disciples. They asked repeatedly about their meaning. Invariably, the explanation included a penetrating application to the inner life. Explanation and application appear to be a necessary, continual, and major role in the discipling process.

Jesus checked the disciples to test their understanding. He would ask them questions. When they exhibited openness to God's Spirit, Jesus commended them.

3. Jesus taught His disciples through relational experiences.

He made sure they were part of His encounters with unbelievers. Jesus exposed the disciples to the world. He did not move them out of it. They were not secluded or protected.

Nor did Jesus attempt to protect His disciples from the corrupt church leaders of the day. He defended His followers. He did not leave them without aid, but neither did He build fences to keep them from the realities of conflict.

Jesus' relationship with the disciples was a mixture of admonition and approval. He called them men of little faith (Matthew 8:26). Then He commended Simon Peter

for correctly discerning who He (Jesus) was. He seemed to know when to prod and when to praise.

The dynamics of relationships continue as they do in the saga of all friends. Jesus disclosed Himself to the twelve. That disclosure was followed by demands of commitment. Jesus gave Himself, but asked all of each of His followers. This happened in a natural, normal sequence of interpersonal involvements.

Jesus ministered to the whole person. Christ gave attention to the emotional well-being of disciples. He knew how they were feeling. Being sensitive to their fears, Jesus calmed His followers.

Jesus then confronted them with the subject of the cross, because He would not hide from them the severity of the situation. He was preparing them for the sudden jolt they would feel when He died. He dealt so candidly because of His love for them.

In the setting of worship and communion, Jesus placed this heavy load of information upon them. He knew the burden of His death could only be carried as the heart responded in love, admiration, obedience. God would sustain the disciples whose security would be severely shaken.

The results of the intimate relationship with Jesus can be observed in the disciples' readiness to assume and to execute the command of Jesus: to make disciples of every person. They were convinced the relationship with Jesus was adequate for them. They would tackle any task for Him.

4. Transferring leadership to the disciples.

After knowing His disciples for a relatively short time, Jesus informed them of the need for leadership. His endeavor of starting a spiritual movement was likened to the harvesting of grain. Reapers were needed.

With the first assignment He gave them, He transferred authority to them in order to carry out the job. He made clear what they were to do. They had directions as to where they were to go, to whom they would minister, how they would conduct themselves, and what the message was. Jesus explained the purpose of the mission. He especially prepared them for resistance. Jesus was thorough in His training.

Jesus delegated responsibility for many aspects of His ministry. He called upon His disciples to help Him in working with the crowds, particularly at the times of feeding the multitudes. The Triumphal Entry reveals how Jesus again used His

disciples. Jesus' close association with Peter, James, and John reflects His intentional plans to shift the load of leadership responsibility.

Jesus allowed His followers to experience failure as well as to taste success. While He was on the Mount of Transfiguration, the nine obscure disciples tried out their God-given ministry. It was a fiasco. Jesus expressed annoyance at their spiritual inability. He thought they should have been persons of faith by this time.

Jesus gradually turned over the reins of leadership. As He did, He reminded the disciples repeatedly of the purpose they were to accomplish. The last words of Christ before His ascension, as recorded by Matthew, contain the summation of purpose and priority. Disciple-making by going, baptizing, and teaching all people summarized the great goal of God. The task was theirs to fulfill through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, our thinking, our feelings, our particular interests and prejudices must conform to God's Word. Our definition and ministry of discipling can be guided by these four biblical criteria: character development, kingdom content, interpersonal relationships, and shifted leadership responsibilities.