

Discipling Like Jesus? Parts 1-3

By GREG FINKE

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...’” Matthew 28:16-19.

Lately, as I have read these familiar words from Matthew 28, my eye has gone to the first few words. Jesus is talking to only eleven disciples. Eleven. That’s not very There are usually more than eleven people in our first few pews on Sunday mornings! Jesus said, “Go make disciples of all nations,” to eleven disciples.

Wow... it makes a person think.

If our local church was the only church on the face of the earth, and Jesus came to us with this commission, would we have a plan to disciple the world?

It’s a sobering thought. But it is also catalytic. Such a thought causes us to ask and answer some very important questions about what a disciple is, what a disciple does how we disciple people. In the next three Dwelling 1:14 blog posts we will begin to answer those questions.

Somehow Jesus started with eleven disciples and went up to billions. Most of our churches start with hundred but have somehow stalled. Could it be connected with o understanding or misunderstanding of what discipling is?

The way Jesus disciplined caused expansion. The way we disciple has caused contraction. What’s going on?

A couple years ago I was with a group of young pastors talking about making disciples. They got excited and headed back to their congregations ready to redouble their efforts on making disciples. The following evening, one of the pastors had an elders meeting and during the meeting began talking in an excited way about making disciples. one of the elders, in a wonderful display of transparency, raised his hand and said, “Pastor, if we are supposed to make disciples, what is one?”

Good question.

It’s easy to use a word like “disciple” prolifically but not be as clear as we could be on the definition. So let’s gain some clarity.

What Is a Disciple?

The place to go to answer our first question is to the Gospels. When we look at the people around Jesus, we can easily see that not everyone who loved and trusted Jesus was a disciple of Jesus. Lots of people loved Jesus, were taught by Jesus, received bread and fish and healing from Jesus. Lots of people received the forgiveness of God from Jesus and had their names written in the book of life.

But only a subset of the crowds who were loved, forgiven and saved by Jesus were disciples of Jesus. We can see that plainly in the Gospel accounts. So, what distinguishes disciples from the rest of the people? It was not that they were loved more or forgiven more. This isn’t about disciples being better than the others. But they were differ How?

In the days of Rabbis and disciples, everybody understood what was happening when someone crossed over from being an admirer of a Rabbi, or a student of a Rabbi a disciple of the Rabbi. Someone who admires a Rabbi honors the Rabbi. Someone who studies about the Rabbi is a student of the Rabbi. But only someone who want become like the Rabbi is a disciple of the Rabbi.

Disciples were people who had come into a specific kind of relationship with the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus called a person to be a disciple, it was with the “Follow me.” They were to get up and begin to follow the Rabbi around so that they would eventually become like the Rabbi. Jesus clarifies this for us in Luke 6:40 w says, “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.”

So, the beginning of a working definition that clearly and concisely captures what we see in the Gospels could be, “A disciple follows Jesus.” Simple enough.

However, this then compels us to ask another clarifying question. What does following Jesus look like? Since we can see the disciples following Jesus around in the G and how they are distinct from the other believers, what are we seeing?

I have the opportunity to travel around the country and interact with many congregations. I often ask that very question. Do you know what I usually hear? When I ask does following Jesus look like?” I hear responses that fall into three general categories:

- “Going to church.” Following Jesus means I participate in religious services.
- “Being good.” Following Jesus means I try to conform to a higher moral standard. (Love God, love people, etc.)
- “Getting theology correct.” Following Jesus means I work at getting my theology accurate.

Certainly, following Jesus includes all three factors. But there must be something missing, because as we look in the Gospels, who fits perfectly into these categories? The Pharisees.

Oops.

The Pharisees participated religiously in religious services, aspired to a higher moral standard, and were fastidious about their theology. But they weren’t followers of What’s missing in their formula?

Actually, getting up and following the person of Jesus!

Being a disciple of Jesus is more than following the religion of Jesus or the moral standard of Jesus or the theology of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus is actually following the personal Spirit of Jesus who is on the move around us every day.

There is one more aspect to being a disciple we should not misplace. “A disciple follows Jesus and shows others how to do the same.” Why do I add, “...and shows others how to do the same?”

Because being a disciple of Jesus by definition includes multiplication, that is, showing others how to follow Jesus, too. In other words, we are not fu participating in the life of being a disciple until we are discipling others to do the same.

And that brings us to our next clarifying question: What do disciples do? Is following Jesus a very complicated pathway or a simple one? Is showing someone how to Jesus very complex or very straightforward?

Discipling Like Jesus? Part 2

Today we have Part 2 of a three-part blog series on what a disciple is, what a disciple does and how to disciple people. Of course, when Jesus commissioned the disciples to make disciples he did not say, "Go and make up a process for discipling people that seems good to you." He said, "Go and in the way you have been disciplined, disciple others." Since Jesus set the pattern for how we are to disciple people, in this blog we are going to the Gospels so our answers reflect what Jesus said and did.

Today we are clarifying, "What Do Disciples Do?" If we can simplify and clarify what disciples do we will be in a much better position to disciple people.

Over the years I have settled on summarizing the answer like this: Disciples seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing around them and show others how to do the same. Why have I landed on this kind of answer?

It reflects the primary practice we see Jesus putting into play every day in the Gospels. This practice precedes all his other practices and brings timing, sequence and purpose to them. What was it?

As we watch Jesus in the Gospels, at first it looks like he is doing 1000 different things. And if we tried to imitate all those practices, it would be overwhelming! But is Jesus really doing 1000 different things or one main thing?

In John 5 Jesus helps us to catch on to his one main practice. "The Son can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does... For I seek not to please myself but him who sent me," (John 5: 19, 30). He puts it even more succinctly in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first his kingdom..."

So, what is the main practice of our Rabbi Jesus? He first seeks and recognizes the work of his Father around him and then responds to it... and, of course, shows others how to do the same. When Jesus responded to what his Father was doing, it looked like Jesus loving, it looked like Jesus teaching, it looked like Jesus healing, and it was Jesus putting those things into practice. But Jesus was first putting into play the practice of seeking and recognizing what his Father was doing so he could respond.

That's our main practice as well: "Disciples seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing around them and show others how to do the same."

How do we "seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing?" We look for where a little grace can be applied. We can start with that. Wherever grace is needed our redeeming Rabbi will already be on the move and inviting us to join him. Count on it.

Next week, we will look at how Jesus disciplined people to do this.

Discipling Like Jesus? Part 3

Doctors of Theology or Followers of Jesus?

Believe it or not, it turns out that discipling people can be pretty simple. Not convinced? Let me ask you, "Are we forming Doctors of Theology or Followers of Jesus?"

If we are forming Doctors of Theology there is a lot of information to master. There is always another book to read and another position paper to consider. In order to become a Doctor of Theology you will

be sitting in a classroom for a very long time. And few have what it takes to succeed. However, Jesus does not commission us to make Doctors of Theology. He commissions us to make disciples, that is, followers of Jesus. Discipling people to be followers of Jesus is more about mastering a few simple practices than it is about mastering libraries of information.

Over time, I have learned I can effectively disciple people by showing them how to put five simple practices into play in their daily lives. These practices position people to seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing in the lives of people around them. What are the five practices?

- 1) Seeking the Kingdom: What is God showing me? Who is he inviting me to notice?
- 2) Hearing from Jesus: What is Jesus teaching me as I follow him around in the Gospels?
- 3) Talking with People: What kind of redemptive conversations am I having with people?
- 4) Doing Good: What good can I do in the places I live, work or go to school?
- 5) Ministering through Prayer: How can I help people by praying with them?

These certainly are simple practices, but they position us to seek, recognize and respond to Jesus every day... which is what a disciple does.

Is all the information in our Bibles and catechisms and theological libraries important? Of course. However, when it comes to discipling the goal is not a scholar but a follower. The goal is not that people master all the information but that they are shown how to put the redemptive love of the Father into play in the lives of the people around them... just like Jesus did.

So How Did Rabbi Jesus Disciple People?

Finally, we get to our most pressing question: How do we disciple people? Our answer should look like Jesus' discipling process. When Jesus commissioned the disciples to make disciples he did not say, "Go and make up a process for discipling people that seems good to you." He said, "Go and in the way you have been disciplined, disciple others."

So how did Jesus disciple people? Let's keep it clear and simple.

First, Jesus invited the disciples to join him in what he was already doing. The disciples were able to begin imitating Jesus because he was not just teaching them how to seek, recognize and respond to his Father he was showing them. Too often leaders forget that they can't lead where they are not going themselves. Disciples can't imitate what their leaders aspire to do. They can only imitate what their leaders are doing. Leaders need to take the lead.

Second, Jesus did not attempt to disciple crowds of people. Rather, he disciplined a smaller subset of the crowds. Notice Jesus had only 12 (and often just 3) on whom he focused. Jesus' strategy was simple: disciple a few in order to disciple many. Jesus knew that discipling cannot be effectively done with large groups of people all at once. Discipling requires unhurried access to the leader so individuals can sort through their questions and experiences and make plans for next steps. Jesus loved the crowds and taught the crowds but he disciplined a smaller subset. Likewise, Jesus had a priority on discipling this smaller subset. He would often leave the crowds behind – even though the crowds still had tremendous need - and go off to disciple the 12. Why? Jesus knew the crowds wouldn't carry on his mission after his ascension. It would be the ones he had disciplined who would carry on his mission. We would do well to trust and imitate his wisdom.

Third, Jesus could only disciple people who wanted to be disciplined. If someone did not want to be disciplined by Jesus, Jesus was content to move on to someone who did. We seem to burn a lot of time and energy trying to disciple people who don't want to be disciplined. Jesus shows us that starting with those who are willing and ready is the way to reach the world.

Finally, Jesus disciplined like a Rabbi. What did that look like? The discipling process had three equally important parts:

- 1) Teaching: The Rabbi sits with a few disciples and tells them what they did not know. His words reveal new worlds to them.
- 2) Imitating and Practicing: The Rabbi then shows the disciples how to put his teachings into play in everyday life. Having been shown how the teachings work, they head out to practice. (See Luke 8:1, 9:1 and 10:1)
- 3) Replicating: Eventually mastering the simple practices of the Rabbi, he sends the disciples out to gather the next group of new disciples so they can imitate and replicate the Rabbi's discipling process all over again.

What does this discipling process look like in play? Let's say I wanted to disciple you (coach you) to play golf.

I start by giving you a book entitled, "How to Play Golf." I tell you to go home and read it and master the information. I say, "Next week I want you to come back prepared to take a detailed test on the information in the book." So you go home and eagerly get started. You read, you memorize, and you master the information. The next week you come back and you take my test and score 100%. Well done!

Now, do you know how to play golf?

Not really. You mastered the information about golf. (You proved it by acing the test.) But once you get to the first tee on the golf course you will quickly realize how little you actually know about how to golf.

The information about golf is important, but it is not all. You need someone to come alongside you to show you how all the information actually works on a real live golf course. You need someone who can show you how. If someone shows you, you can start imitating how he addresses the ball, how he holds the club and how he takes a swing. Once you see it, you can imitate it and start practicing it.

At first golf seems complicated and awkward. But with a little discipling (coaching) you begin to get the hang of it. You see, you did not lack information (you mastered the book!). You lacked a coach to imitate and help you practice. Turns out, golf is not as complicated as you thought. Soon enough you know how to get up on the first tee and hit a 150-yard-worm-burner. It is not perfect. It is not pretty. But you are playing golf. You are no longer on the sideline. You are playing the game.

And, by the way, now that you know how to golf you can show others how to do the same. Even below-average golfers can show beginners the basics of how to play golf.

So discipling people to follow Jesus can be as simple as this:

- 1) We begin seeking, recognizing and responding to Jesus ourselves. (We can't show others what we are not doing.)
- 2) We regularly gather in community with the few who are ready and willing to begin. (This does not take a majority of our time but it does take a priority of our time.)
- 3) At our gatherings we support each other while we are learning to put the five practices into play in our daily lives. We do this by asking each other the five questions which correspond to the five practices (listed above). Hearing and telling our stories in these gatherings help us move from teaching in the group to imitating and practicing in real life.
- 4) By God's grace and with a little help from our friends, we move from awkward beginners to actual followers. And don't miss this: we are in the game! We are seeking, recognizing and responding to what Jesus is already doing around us.
- 5) And, by the way, now that we are following Jesus we can show others how to do the same by gathering the next group of new disciples and imitating and replicating the Rabbi's discipling process all over again.