

What Is a Disciple?

What is a disciple? In Greek, *disciple* literally means a learner. Another way to define a disciple is by looking at his or her relationships. A disciple has a dependent relationship with Jesus, an interdependent relationship with other believers, and a redemptive relationship with the world. Perhaps Jesus gave the best definition: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31).

Jesus identified two components of discipleship as he called his apostles (Mark 3:14): "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might *be with him* and that he might *send them* out to preach." The first part is to be with him, to follow Jesus and grow continually in understanding and obedience. The second part is to be sent—to reach out to others. This is the gathering and scattering method of Jesus in action.

Part of being a disciple of Jesus is being obedient to his Word. In the Great Commission, "to obey" is the object of "teaching them." A new believer does not accept Jesus as Savior and later take him as Lord. The two go hand in hand. Placing oneself under the Lordship of Jesus is part of becoming a new creature in Christ.

At the same time, a disciple is a learner. He has not yet achieved Christlikeness—he is working toward it (Philippians 3:12-14). Christians are truly people in process. Living as a disciple takes effort. It means more than just sitting in a pew or a classroom every Sunday morning.

How a Disciple Grows

In 1987, Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, was listed as the sixth fastest-growing church in America. Worship attendance had increased by more than twelve-hundred people in one year. The church has continued to grow rapidly, and in 1989-90 was ranked as the twenty-ninth fastest-growing church. In 1992, Southeast had 1,181 additions and their total membership at the end of the year was more than eight thousand. In reference to the growth in 1989, preaching minister Bob Russell said, "But ... how committed are those 1,200 new people? ... Do our people really know what they believe? How do we utilize everybody's gifts? How can we shepherd this increasing number of people?"

Charles Swindoll asks a similar question and responds: How can a large church that attracts so many people from such varied backgrounds harness the energy and move people from mere spectators to participants? I can assure you it doesn't happen automatically. People don't suddenly get involved, drop their guard, and devote themselves to one another. The secret is a firm commitment to assimilation. As I realized how easily our church could become a huge body of spectators, strangers to one another and rootless in our commitment to Christ, I began to speak on the value of becoming involved in a small-group ministry—a fellowship group, a choir, an evangelistic team, a prayer group, a weekly home Bible class, one of our women's organizations, or men's groups. In any one of these special groups, there could be more in-depth sharing and involvement.

The Great Commission is often called the church's evangelistic mandate. But the stress of those verses is on discipleship. Jesus said to "go and make disciples," not "go and make church members." That commission indicates the "product" of the disciple-making process: a learner and follower of Jesus as Savior who obeys Him as Lord. How does this process take place? In relationship with others, including all types of groups. In the group he is assimilated into the life of the body so that he may begin the disciple-making process. I have found that it is difficult if not impossible to disciple someone who has not been assimilated into a group.

So, except for intentionally closed groups (such as support, recovery, or growth groups), every group in the church must work at assimilating and discipling new people. Researchers have consistently found that making new friends in the church is a major factor in retaining new members. Converts who make seven or more new friends normally do not drop out. If transfers do not find a meaningful group within six months, they tend to drop out or become inactive.

One traditional method for assimilating new members is to assign them new-member shepherds. But unless that person is a close friend already, this type of programmatic approach may not be very effective. Shepherds and sheep often do not become close enough for any real discipling to take place. Someone does not become a disciple simply by becoming involved in a program. When my wife, Heidi, and I became members of one church, we were assigned a new-member shepherd, a single man in his seventies. At the time, Heidi and I

were in our twenties. Bob (not his real name) had nothing in common with us, had no basis on which to "shepherd" us, and never spent any time with us. The lack of any real shepherding was not Bob's fault. The shepherding program was not organized on real, natural relationships, but with an institutional mind-set. To get people involved—to assimilate them, shepherd them, disciple them—they need to be in a group of people with whom they have some connectedness and who really care for, support, and encourage them.

David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the largest church in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church, in Seoul, South Korea, says there is practically no back door in his church. "The reason," he says, "is that each home cell group is like a family circle. Through these family circles people feel a sense of belonging, and they are kept in the church."

We cannot wait for people to map out their own discipleship process. Like sheep, they must be led. But how?

On the day of Pentecost, three thousand people were added to the number of disciples. Within a short while, thousands more were also added. How would the apostles assimilate all these people? Would all these newcomers understand what they were undertaking? Who was going to teach them the basics? How would the twelve shepherd all of them? The enormity of this "problem" for the Jerusalem church was larger than any at Southeast Christian Church or the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton. The numerical growth was greater; the time span was smaller; and the Jerusalem church had no "organization" set up to assimilate the new people. And perhaps that was to their advantage. Jesus didn't leave a book of instructions for his apostles to build an organization with structures to disciple all the new converts. He gave them his example of discipleship in community. Throughout the book of Acts, then, the apostles did basically what Jesus did. They met in the temple courts, in the streets, along the roads, and in people's homes—in large gatherings and in small groups. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (2:47).

What a Disciple Does

Disciples grow in community, but they also learn to minister in community. Paul assured the Roman Christians they were "competent to instruct one another" (15:14). To the same "royal priesthood" that Peter addressed in 1 Peter 2:9, he said, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (4:10). The New Testament makes it clear that ministry is to be divided among the whole body of Christ, not just a select few.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul repeated the same message three times, that every person should stay in the situation he was in when God called him (vv. 17, 20, 24). The implication is that every believer is strategically positioned by God. Every disciple has a gift to be used in the body and each has opportunities to utilize that gift in service to others. A role of the church is to help new Christians identify their gifts, to help them find opportunities to serve, and to equip them to use their gifts and opportunities for service *where they are*.

Often, however, the church does just the opposite. New believers get the message that they are to withdraw from old relationships. Many Christians I know in the church have told me they can't witness to non-Christians because they don't know any. They are so involved in the programs of the church and with Christian friends that they never seem to have the chance to make new friends with "people they have nothing in common with." This is unfortunate, because when we become Christians, each of us is in a unique position of influence in the world. No one else has the specific opportunities that we have as ambassadors for Christ. When believers in a church begin to see themselves as insiders in their part of the world—in the office or factory, in the school, in the neighborhood or in the family—then the whole body will start working together as it should.

The meta-church model proposed by Carl George is one system that can help people minister where they are. In most churches, staff ministers are burned out from overwork, doing, in effect, the work of the entire body. In the meta-model, ministry is done by the people, in their cell groups and in cell-leader training. This lifts the unnecessary burden off the staff ministers to allow them to do their own specific tasks better. What tasks? "To prepare God's people for works of service" (Ephesians 4:12). God has given specific gifts to the leaders of the church to equip the people to minister to one another and move each other toward unity, faith, knowledge, and maturity. The result is that "the body of Christ may be built up." The meta-model allows disciples to make disciples and to care for, encourage, and support one another.

Disciples Are Disciple Makers

Jesus spent most of his time with twelve average men: fishermen, tax collectors, and the like. While he was with them for three years, they were undependable, slow to learn, and, at times, self-absorbed. Yet Jesus' plan was to disciple these twelve men and then to turn them loose to take the most important message of all time to the entire world. What if they failed? What was Plan B? There was no other plan. Jesus could have devoted his time to the masses so that they would be saved, but he could not have developed the kind of intimate relationships with them that he had with his apostles. That is the genius of his strategy. By spending time intensely discipling a few, they would be equipped to multiply his message over and over again.

Jesus did spend some time with the multitudes, but he concentrated on the smaller groups, particularly the twelve, and especially the three—Peter, James, and John. After Pentecost, the apostles also spent some time with the multitudes, but they spent a considerable amount of time in smaller groups. In years past, the church has stressed reaching out to the multitudes through rallies, revivals, and crusades. Not as much attention has been placed on conserving the harvest, assimilating new members into the body, and helping them to become healthy, growing disciples. This was not the strategy of Jesus or the early church.

The need is to place greater stress on smaller groups of people, but not at the expense of the multitudes. The church must first build the foundation, and that foundation is the small group, just as Jesus' primary ministry was with his small group. Small groups themselves, however, do not make disciples. Neither do Sunday schools, evangelism programs, or worship services. Programs do not make disciples. Disciples make disciples.

At the same time, however, different size groups are the context in which discipling takes place. Several levels of group sizes can be involved in the discipling process. In a one-on-one situation, one person disciplines another, maybe someone he or she has led to Christ. Or it could be between two Christians who agree to meet for study, prayer, confession, or encouragement. Vulnerability and accountability are also key ingredients in this smallest of small groups. The second level is a group of three or four people, usually the same sex, who meet regularly to pray, study, share, and hold each other accountable. In small groups of eight to twelve, intimate relationships can be built to allow disciple making to take place or to encourage disciples to use their gifts in the marketplace and in the neighborhoods to make disciples. Sunday school classes may also be utilized in the disciple-making process, especially for Bible learning and application. But the larger the size of the class—unless it is broken down into smaller groups—the less opportunity there is for true discipling to take place.

The Lookout magazine once received a letter from a reader who disagreed with an article about the Great Commission. She argued that Jesus gave the Commission to his apostles only, not to Christians today. The thought is absurd! Jesus would not give instructions, especially instructions as important as these, that would be impossible to fulfill. But it would have been impossible for twelve men, or even one hundred and twenty people, to disciple *all* nations. In fact, the genius of Jesus' strategy is that his Commission would be passed on from disciple to disciple to disciple, through the generations, until all the world could be disciplined.

Disciples making disciples is the law of multiplication. In the past, the church has used the law of addition. As an example, say an evangelist wins one thousand people per day (a rather good harvest!). At the end of one year he has won 365,000 people. At the end of twenty-five years, he has won 9,125,000 people.

Multiplication works differently and more slowly. Say a disciple wins and trains one person a year. At the end of one year, there are two disciples. But each of those two disciples wins and trains one person the following year, and so on. At the end of twenty-five years, 33,554,432 disciples have been made. It would take the evangelist nearly 92 years to win that many people to Christ (without being able to adequately disciple them). Using the multiplication method as described above, the entire world could be disciplined in less than thirty-five years.

Only certain individuals in the church have the spiritual gift of evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Peter Wagner says only 10% of church members have the gift of evangelist and only one-half percent are doing it. But everyone is a witness. In Acts 1:8 Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The apostles could be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and maybe Judea and Samaria, but it would have been too much to ask of a few relatively uneducated men to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. That assignment was given to all Christians, and all who are really his disciples have the ability and opportunity to carry it out either in their own neighborhoods or work places or as overseas missionaries.

If God's church is to multiply the way he intended, it must get serious about discipleship.

Excerpted from [The Synergy Church: A Strategy for Integrating Small Groups and Sunday School](#), Chapter 3, by Michael C. Mack.