

Intentional Disciple Making

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by Louise Lee



Disciple making in the local church is facing great challenges today. 21st century is characterized by the booming of personal technology; using of Internet and mobile phone is so widespread that many European countries are nearing 100% penetration; its influence in Asia is also in the uphill rise.

The total number of mobile phone subscribers has cruised north of 1.8 billion according to research released today by Informa Telecoms & Media. According to the report, the number will swell to 2.14 billion by the end of 2005. Developing nations such as China and India are adding the most new subscribers. Many European countries are nearing 100% penetration. Global mobile phone penetration currently sits at 28%, leaving a large market still available. (MobileTracker Cell Phone News and Reviews. May 18, 2005)

We can see there is a great competition coming from the easily accessible Internet of atheistic knowledge, new age philosophies, postmodern relativism; today celebrities are setting the moral values for people instead of the parents or authorities at home or in the country. The world has gone into an uncontrollable state; minds are being bombarded by images that do not hold any moral intent. Many people are confused; they are not sure what is right and wrong anymore.

In the bestselling book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, author Thomas L. Friedman alludes to the perceptual shift required for countries, companies and

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individuals to remain competitive in a global market where historical and geographical divisions are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Likewise, as a Church mandated to do Jesus' business (Mt 28: 18-20

), to remain competitive and effective, discipling ought to be intentional; it is not an option.

Biblical Disciple Making

"While there are valid differences of perspective on what constitutes discipleship, we define Christian discipleship as a process that takes place within accountable relationships over a period of time for the purpose of bringing believers to spiritual maturity in Christ. Biblical examples suggest that discipleship is both relational and intentional, both position and process" (Eastbourne Consultation on Discipleship, 1999)

Based on this definition, how do we measure effectiveness? Many local churches are engaging in various forms of disciple making programs, but are all effectively producing disciples? Bennett raised some questions on this: What impact does your ministry have on the culture it exists? How much does it shape the moral, character, agenda, perceptions, and worldview of those in the local community? Are authentic disciples being made of those who convert to Christianity? Are the lives of believers radically changed as a result of their encounter with your ministry? Does transformation take their place, or do members simply conform to a religious set of norms? Is Christ likeness being manifested through the lives of individual believers in private and in community?

The answers to these questions are the essence of disciple making, that is the end product. In another words, it is the kind of disciples the churches ought to be producing today. Greg Ogden (Author of Transforming Discipleship) sees the end result of disciple making are self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Christ. George Barna sees disciples as zealots for Christ individuals who are intractably devoted to knowing, loving, and serving, Him with all their heart, mind and soul, and they are to transform the world.

Disciples are made, not born. Intentional discipleship is required to produce these kinds of followers. In order to achieve these, strategies are required. No one builds a house without a blueprint and know-how. Building effective disciples requires more than just a good intention, but a strategized intention.

Jesus the Master Trainer

The best strategies come from our Lord Jesus himself. Knowing that he had a short three years ministry on earth, his discipling was intentional with strategies. He knew the only way to grow the flawed and faithless common people into mature disciples and make sure that his kingdom would transcend his earthly ministry was to have a core who knew in depth his person and mission. His life and mission needed to be internalized in the lives of the disciples. In choosing the twelve, Jesus' strategy was to expand the leadership base, so that instead one, there would be twelve. He applied the strategy of effective multiplication.

If we examined Jesus' methods of training the twelve, we could discover a model process of

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disciplemaking: At stage one, early in his ministry, Jesus was a living example. The disciples watched him carefully. They began to absorb his message and understand his ministry.

At stage two, Jesus was a provocative educator. Jesus' intent was not only to inform the disciples of a new kingdom perspective but also to dislodge the wrong-headed ideas and assumptions imbedded in the minds of the disciples from the religious and secular world.

At stage three, Jesus was the ultimate delegator. Now, the disciples had internalized Jesus' teaching. They are able to survive through the great scattering after Jesus' crucifixion; they were able to regroup after the resurrection and they were empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus' ministry had become theirs. They were ready to do what Jesus had done.

Follow Jesus' example, the priority of disciple making should be an effective multiplication of leaders, who will carry on the ministry of reproduction on their own without further supervision.

Paul's Model

Paul took a different approach and employed a different strategy in disciple making. Paul termed disciple making as spiritual parenting. In many passages, he conveyed this message: In 1 Cor 3:1-2, 1 Cor. 14:20, Paul described new believers as newborns, required milk for growth, and they are to grow into adulthood eating solid food; in Eph 4:13-14, Paul talked about growing into maturity, those who are children will be tossed around by wrong doctrines; In 1 Cor 4:15, Paul said he became a father to them through the Gospel.

Balwicks in the The Family (Baker, 1991) stated, "Successful parenting will result in the children's gaining as much personal power as the parents themselves have. In the Christian context, children who have been empowered love God and their neighbors as themselves. They are capable of going beyond themselves to reach out to others." And Paul's description of the maturing process is transformation (Rom 12:2). Transformed into the likeness of Christ is the goal of discipling.

In Col 1:29, we know that the process is not causal but intentional. Paul said, for this "I toiled", meaning he had put in all his energy in bringing people in the likeness of Christ. He spent his energy to bring a spiritual child through several stages: Infancy is the stage of imitation. Paul called the believers to imitate him (1Cor. 4:16); Childhood is the stage of identification. Paul identified with the believers by entering into their lives, connected with them emotionally (Gal 4: 19); Adolescence is the stage of exhortation. Paul is the father or coach to exhort Timothy to live up to his life's calling (2 Tim 4:5). Adulthood is the stage of participation. Mutuality and partnership mark the adult stage of Paul's ministry. He refers to Titus as "my partner and co-worker in his service" (2 Cor 8:23).

The Mark of a True disciple making Church

After looking at the biblical models of discipling, we need to translate them into the practicality of today's ministry in order to be effective. Several elements are essential to make the intentional effort productive:

Firstly, Disciple making is not for just the effort of individuals, but rather it is a community project. In Follow Me, Jan Hettings explained that the gospel is not just a gift to receiver, but a new leader to follow. Given the increasingly biblically illiterate public, the Christian community needs to do more than merely exposed those outside of the church to the gospel. It needs to patiently help those within and without to understand a more fully in community. Churches need to recognize that they are a discipling community; they are to employ a collective effort of exercising individual gifting to accomplish of purpose of discipling.

Secondly, true disciple making community ought to understand and learn when and how to use the three relational dynamics: Big groups, small groups and life-to-life. Big groups dynamics always triggers the starting point of discipleship, it is limited in ministering to individuals and may produce spectators; Small groups ministry is encouraging discipleship. An effective small group is characterized by care, growth, training and task; Life-to-life is called 'mentoring' (in Connecting by Paul Stanley and Robert Clinton). They defined it as "personal experience in which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources."

The Mark of a True Disciple

Thirdly, true discipling communities produce true disciples. By looking at the fruits, we know what tree it is. How does a true disciple look like? They should possess four main qualities (commitment, competence, character and conviction) and one ability (reproductivity).

A true disciple's commitment is to the person of Jesus, not to a cause, to a church, an ideal or even a set of truths will grow committed apprentice of Jesus Christ; Competence in studying the Bible and in applying it to daily living tells if a person is a true disciple or not. Immature believers are always looking to be fed, but rather seek to become self-feeding; Character is being developed in a disciple's life through spiritual disciplines. Conviction caused one to hold on to the truth and it is the evidence of applying the truth rather than just knowing the truth. Reproductivity should be the natural ability of a true disciple. "A multiplier is a disciple who is training his spiritual children to reproduce themselves" (Discipleship, Zondervan, 1981).

Above all, it is a transformed life that marks a true disciple.

Conclusion

Intentional disciple making is a powerful process because it produces world-changers. As we see from the life of Peter, James and John, they were ordinary people made world-changers. It is not an impossible task for today's Church to engage in successful intentional disciple making; it takes more than just a paradigm shift, but also turning faith into action - the belief of making true disciple of Jesus.

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