

Discipling Relationships

Away on spiritual retreat several years ago, I was seeking God with the question, “What do you want me to be doing in my later years?”

I don’t often get a direct response to my queries but that must have been the right question at the right moment, for I promptly understood with certainty in my spirit:

“Be in discipling relationships.”

Wow. I knew immediately it was wisdom from above and that I hadn’t thought it up on my own. Those simple but profound words served to free me from my me-centered aspirations of gaining a big platform from which I could influence the multitudes for God.

Silly me. I now realized that the most positive influence I could have in this life is by being in relationships that produce close followers of Jesus.

Makes sense.

You are likely well-familiar with the Master’s mission on the matter. Read it over again, slowly this time.

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20, MEV).

So, we see it’s a matter of acting on the spiritual authority Jesus gives us to go, baptize and teach others, knowing He is with us all the way. Personalizing it, He’s in a discipling relationship with me so I can be in a discipling relationship with others. Won’t you join me in getting on with the mission?

Great. If we're going to be making disciples, maybe we should start with the question.

What is a disciple?

A disciple is a talmid in the Hebrew and a mathetes in the Greek. Both ancient words mean, simply, a learner. In biblical context, a disciple is a close follower who learns from the teacher, not just gaining knowledge but walking in the footsteps of the master, steadily becoming more and more like him. We call the process discipleship.

What, then, is the more popularly used term mentorship?

Mentorship is not, I propose, a suitable substitute for the lifelong, relation-based, life-transformative process that Jesus enables by His command. Since it deals with one (the mentor) modeling for another (the mentee) a skill that he or she can gain, mentorship certainly has its place in our transactional, task-oriented society. But can you imagine Jesus adopting a business mentality for His church by directing...

"Team, go and mentor lots of mentees who have the skills we need to get this project done!"

Clearly, something was lost in translation. What was lost? Well, the foundation.

When searching for foundational understanding on which to build my faith and practice, I tend to wax Hebraic. By that I mean, God founded His work in the earth within a Hebraic worldview. Indeed, we find that while discipleship comes from the Hebraic context, mentorship comes from the Greek. Both have their places but for the long-haul on this earth, into eternity, I vote for discipleship like Jesus modeled and commanded.

The Jewish talmidim learned to walk in the dust of their

esteemed rabbi—to watch, listen and do the works of their master. We see Jesus and His disciples in that very relationship, with world-changing results.

And what about mentor. Where did that originate?

You'll find that word as a proper noun in Homer's *Odyssey*. In Greek mythology, mentor was an old man who was assigned as guide for young Telemachus while his dad Ulysses was off to war. Mentor was actually a failure so the goddess Athena played the trickster, morphing into the form of mentor to complete the training of young Telemachus.

Maybe you see why I like the Hebraic/Rabbi/Jesus model better. No morphing gods required. And it's the learner who does the morphing.

Both mentorship and discipleship mean learning something important: Mentorship is learning a task; Discipleship is learning a person: The Lord Jesus Christ.

Greek thinking is about gaining knowledge for knowledge's sake but the Hebraic worldview is about gaining knowledge for a life of obedience, service and worship of God. In this way of life, mere learning is not enough; a loving response is required. This God-exalting pathway is modeled by the disciple such that he/she becomes a disciple-maker, passing the knowledge of God from generation to generation.

When our Lord Jesus pronounced what we call the Great Commission, He enacted something revolutionary about the nations—something you may have overlooked before. Prior to this moment, Jesus had limited His disciples' ministry of the gospel to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" whom He had come to gather (cf. Matthew 15:24). The Master had actually held back His disciples from going to the Gentiles, until great co-mission.

Jesus wasn't saying to go all over the map making disciples,

because the “nations” are the ethnos, ethnically non-Israel, commonly called the Gentiles. Jesus was at last releasing His Jewish disciples to go bring in all the lost sheep! If you are a grateful Gentile like me, then you are a follower of Jesus thanks to their obedience who, on His authority, went, baptized and taught others who went, baptized and taught others, etc.

So be encouraged, fellow disciple-maker. Jesus, who has all authority, is still on mission to make close followers of us ethnos. He has co-missioned you and me into the work and is empowering us to go get them, baptize them and teach them all He has commanded.

And what do we need to do, other than being the disciple we’ve been made to be? It’s simple really.

Be in discipling relationships.

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