

Why ‘Discipleship’ Is the Church’s Newest Buzzword

The Core of True Discipleship

In recent years, “discipleship” has become the new buzzword. As a result, we’ve seen churches begin to make a shift toward helping people grow up spiritually and utilize the best means to that end. Leaders have begun to recognize that disciple-making involves spending time with the person being discipled outside of a church service. Many have accepted the fact that people learn best in a small group where they can ask questions and get one-on-one attention.

Something’s Still Missing

Although leaders now accept that discipleship happens best in relational small groups, something is still seriously missing. Some are using relationship merely as a means to transfer information. They have simply exchanged platforms and are now teaching from a living room rather than a pulpit. They are still aiming for the goal of knowledge alone. Spiritual maturity is much more than simply knowing the right information and learning to follow the rules, or even learning to use your gifts for the purposes of God. If we don’t understand what true maturity is, then our discipleship will still be incomplete.

Spiritual Maturity Is Lacking

The other day I met with a pastor, and I asked him what percentage of his church was spiritually mature. He estimated maybe 10 to 20 percent. Because he pastors a church that makes decisions “congregationally,” this lack of maturity presents a real problem. If they wanted to, his congregation could vote him out of his position.

I pointed out that this is much like a family of five that has set up a system allowing the children a majority vote over their parents. To make matters worse, if 80 to 90 percent of the people are immature and represent the Lord to the unsaved in their spheres of influence, then it's no wonder non-Christians don't have an accurate picture of who Jesus is, or what He is capable of doing in the life of a believer. Why would non-Christians want to come into a spiritual nursery, where the brats rule the roost?

Knowledge Alone Means Nothing

The apostle Paul had to deal with the same problem. The church of Corinth had great leaders, who were supremely gifted spiritually. Yet Paul still saw a group of immature believers. He writes: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. If I give all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Paul is writing to people who think they are mature because they know a lot—and are able to speak in the language of angels. They may even be giving their possessions away and dying for their religion, but he points out that without love, all of it means nothing.

Spiritual Maturity Means Loving Others

We can learn about God but still miss who He is—He is love. Spiritual maturity means becoming great lovers of others. True spiritual maturity is to allow the Holy Spirit to make you a relational person. Jesus made the point that all of the law and the prophets are summed up in love for God and love for others (Matt. 22:40). As believers we know that when we're

born again, the Holy Spirit moves inside us and begins to do His work. The fruit He produces in us is relational: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

So What Do We Need?

God's Spirit:

We need the Holy Spirit in us to ensure God's love through us in relationship. Otherwise it's just a nice idea. Love is ruined if the devil, the destroyer of relationship, is allowed to work. Our sinful nature left to itself is selfish and proud and will kill relationship. The culture of this world is designed to entice our sinful nature to act out, and this hurts any chance to be what we were designed to be.

God's Word:

We must have God's Word to help us restore the right definition of love. Why? The devil has no problem allowing people to think they need love, but he changes the definition of the word slightly so that the word loses its power. God's Word gives us the true definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

God's People:

God also gave us mature believers who are called on to make disciples. God's Spirit + God's Word + God's people = God's way of helping us move from death to maturity. It's not enough that we now have the right definition of the word "love." We need more mature people to show infants what it actually looks like, through modeling what love looks like in action.

Relationship Is the Goal

Relationship is not a means to an end alone, but it is the end also. To love God and love others in relationship is maturity. You don't give up relationship once you have transferred right information and behavior. All right information and behavior

leads to relationship. Jesus said it this way: “People will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35 ESV).

As believers, we must understand that maturity in Christ is to understand who our God is in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the perfect picture of love for God and others. It’s my hope that the church focuses on maturity, as God defines it. If we do, the world will notice a difference in us and will be drawn to the One who gives us real life.



For Relational Discipleship Training, please visit our website .



For further reading on the topic of spiritual maturity.

The Power of Together

by Jim Putman



New resource for small groups coming in 2017!

The Power of Together Workbook

by Jim Putman

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