

MENTORING LEADERS FOR ONGOING DISCIPLESHIP – MY ROLE AS A WORLD CHRISTIAN

A. - Equipping Co-workers

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (9)

The greatest thing that ever happened in your life was when you met Jesus Christ. You had heard so much about His reputation you were initially ambivalent about meeting Him in person. He seemed so much larger than life. The transformation occurred when He called you to follow Him and you took the plunge. From that day forward you were enrolled in a life-long “school of discipleship”, learning how to do the work to which He was calling you. He taught you how to live God’s way. He coached you in a life of prayer (His entire life seemed motivated by prayer). He instilled values and integrity based on God’s character, rather than religious traditions alone. The priests carped and criticised, but could not find any evidence of sin in His life. He mentored the life of faith in God and showed you how to trust Him for the right outcomes in tough situations. He explained how to interpret God’s word, not the way the Pharisees and lawyers used it, but by the laws and principles of the Author. Now you approach the Bible from a new standpoint and know how to apply it in your day-to-day circumstances, making Christianity practicable. He demonstrated God’s love, pulling the team together, teaching you the importance of forgiveness, tolerance, kindness and going out of your way to be instruments of His kindness in a loveless world. Facing a barrage of criticism from the legal and theological establishments, He showed you how to respond to detractors in God’s way. He taught you about God’s Kingdom, so that each situation felt like a training ground that had purpose. He didn’t let any opportunity pass, but explained the principles of the King. Jesus gave you authority to perform miracles and the power of the Spirit to serve others. He taught you how to hear the voice of God; on occasions you hear that voice, loud and clear; at other times it is just a whisper, but unmistakably God speaking. He selflessly cared for those who hounded Him to the cross. He stressed the importance of caring for new disciples. He promised that the Holy Spirit would come into your life; the same Holy Spirit who had descended on Him would be with you, in you, giving you power to continue His work. Finally, He showed by example how to get out of the sanctuary and take God’s life into the heart of the global marketplace. “Go into all the world.” Having done all that, He got the group together one last time, told you to do exactly what He had done, with others, said good-bye and returned to heaven.

Jesus equipped His disciples

Jesus chose and trained disciples from the very beginning of His ministry. He used every opportunity to teach them God’s ways. The Great Commission to disciple the nations involved continuing the work He had already initiated.

On the rear wall of the dining hall at the Dominican convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Italy is a painting of the Last Supper executed by Leonardo da Vinci from 1495-1498. It is one of the world's most appreciated (and restored) masterpieces. I have a Greek Orthodox icon depicting the same event that I acquired from the Kykkos Monastery in Cyprus (founded in 1092 by the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos). Both paintings show Jesus instituting the Last Supper, or Eucharist, the simple meal that symbolized His work on the cross. The scene is illustrative of Jesus' teaching style.

From His very first encounters, with the first group of disciples, Jesus did not stop instructing them, by a combination of teaching and example. Individually and corporately He showed them how to:

- live a life of spontaneous prayer as the primary strategy in serving God
- maintain a godly life, because character is everything
- exercise faith in God (not just faith in faith, as many do)
- understand the Bible and apply it to their circumstances
- be vessels of God's love
- serve one another, instead of using others to achieve selfish ends
- build a solid Christian community based on right attitudes and relationships
- respond to opponents with forgiveness and love
- heal the sick and cast out demons
- interpret life according to Kingdom principles
- hear God's voice for themselves
- care for new Christians
- experience the presence of the Holy Spirit
- live for Him in the global marketplace
- and much, much more.

How did Jesus do it? One thing is sure; when he said "Learn from me (Matthew 11:29) He wasn't talking about memorizing a set of academic facts derived from an arcane textbook, but modelling a holistic "faith works" lifestyle.

What does the New Testament teach us about equipping co-workers to be effective Christians? What lessons can we adopt? They all boil down to a few simple principles.

1. *Helping co-workers cope with life's difficulties*

On the eve of His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus drew aside the disciple Simon Peter and warned him of difficult times ahead. Peter was headstrong and self-assured. The cross would rattle him. In the midst of his bravado Jesus warned:

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to have all of you, to sift you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up your brothers." (Luke 22:31, 32)

Jesus knew that Peter's faith would be tested to the limit. His confidence would be shaken. His cockiness would barely survive the cross. "Sober up", Jesus was saying, "you will nearly be derailed by what is ahead. But when you come back to me you will be strong enough to help others cope with stresses and fractured relationships and hopes and manage their problems in a redemptive way".

I recently read the following on an Interserve postcard (Interserve is a "network of Christians from all over the world who, using their professional skills, work together to serve people of Asia and the Arab world - getting alongside them in tackling material, physical, mental and spiritual needs").

"I met a man coming back from the place I was going to. He advised me to go no further. He told me of the dangers and difficulties I would face if I persevered. I thanked him for his advice, and ignored it. Later on in my travels I suffered the troubles he had warned me of. I regretted nothing."

Producing disciples involves helping them keep their eye on the ball when times get tough (as they will) and not to give up (as others around them surely will), because "(God) who has promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23).

2. *Helping them grow in the faith*

"Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-19)

In the hours before Jesus' crucifixion, Peter denied Him three times. His boasts that he would "go anywhere, pay any price, surmount any obstacle" to support Jesus, proved hollow and he wilted in the face of the threat of suffering. But Jesus was forgiving. With the grace of God, Peter was brought back to a position of leadership and equipped to develop younger Christians.

Maybe you feel as though you haven't been as effective as you would like. You can only give what you have. Let the Holy Spirit help you grow and teach you, so that you can draw on that to serve, encourage and instruct others.

Paul's relationship with Timothy is a good example of one disciple equipping another. By way of background, Paul first met Timothy in Lystra (situated in modern Turkey) during his second missionary journey. Timothy had come from a godly family. Paul subsequently made a deliberate decision to invest his life in equipping him (cf Acts 16:1-5; 1 Timothy 1:2). As they travelled together, teaching and preaching, Timothy was able to draw on the skills and leadership of Paul to hone his own God-given ministry. When Paul was obliged by circumstances to leave Berea, he left Silas (a key travelling companion) behind to build the Christian work in Macedonia (Acts 17:14). Later on, Paul called Timothy "our co-worker for God and our brother in proclaiming the Good News of Christ" (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Timothy worked hard ministering to the Christian community in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3). Paul's letters to Timothy (there are two in the New Testament; they form part of his collection of so-called "pastoral epistles") are filled with practical advice about Christian service.

Timothy spent part of his life in jail, including with Paul (Colossians 1:1; Philippians 1:1 and Philemon 1). The Apostle writes of him, “as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Philippians 2:22). It all started because Paul was prepared to spend time with him, equipping Him in the work of discipleship. It paid big dividends.

If you have been a Christian for a while, it is time to start investing in other believers (Hebrews 5:11-14). You may feel self-conscious about discipling. We all feel we lack time, training and authority to do everything we wish, but the model is a Biblical one. Let’s grab every opportunity to invest in the lives of fellow-disciples.

3. *Helping them recognise God’s Master Plan for their lives*

The disciples had gifts and abilities, but they had to be shaped and anointed by God before they could be effective. In every church there are gifted Christian men and women with years of experience and the call of God on their lives, who will never fulfil His greater purposes. They sit there, week after week, year after year, stagnant, bored or indifferent, largely ineffectual, spiritually barren and frustrated. Many of them desperately want to serve God, but don’t know how to do so or where to start. The structures around them that represent “church” are rigid, unyielding and monopolized; doors are closed. They end up feeling they have nothing of value to contribute, or that, if they do, they will be ignored or shunned. Some of them have been in a series of churches, asking the same questions, looking for the same answers; their current ecclesiastical address is but a step along a pilgrim path that involves lots of dry wells and fruitless locations.

Every Christian, in every culture, has something of value to contribute to the world Christian movement, to the glory of God; something that has eternal value and will outlast them. Some are like the woman who gave the last two coins she had and was praised by Jesus (Luke 21:1-4), or Joseph who gave his new tomb for the burial of Jesus (Luke 23:50-53). Others are like the women who provided for Jesus and his disciples throughout their ministry. We are all different. Our faith walk is not contingent on what happens to others, but how we respond to the voice of Jesus calling us to “follow” (cf John 21:20-21).

Every Christian has the Holy Spirit living inside them, a relationship with Father God, a God-shaped born-again heart and the supernatural capacity to speak to the Eternal and hear His voice and message for their lives and their world. That is awesome!

Allow God to help you draw out people who can become effective Christians in their respective marketplaces. You can do that by sharing with them how to understand God’s Word, how to make prayer a language of relationship, how to listen to His voice; how to operate with God’s team (there is one Master but many team members; many parts, but the Body is one); and how to move from passivity to obedience.

4. *Helping them understanding His specific call*

Equipping co-workers in the work of God includes teaching them how to read circumstances according to the purpose of God for their individual lives. There is no room for “Lone Rangers”. Some Christians are very jealous about “their” ministries. On one level, it is understandable that leadership protects those entrusted to their care and maintain responsibility from error (read the story of Paul in Galatians 2:11-20). But the church belongs to Jesus. There is no room for pride or super-heroes.

Jesus gave gifts to enable everyone to carry out some work of ministry (or service), for the good of all. Let’s look at a few practical examples from the menu.

“Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others. God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you. If your gift is that of servicing others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.” (Romans 12:4-8)

“He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ. Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.” (Ephesians 4:11-16)

“Now there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service in the church, but it is the same Lord we are serving. There are different ways God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work through all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church.

To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another he gives the gift of special knowledge. The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else he gives the power to heal the sick. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and to another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another spirit that is speaking. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, and another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it. Here is a list of some of the members that God has placed in the body of Christ: first are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, then those who do miracles, those who have the gift of healing, those who can help others, those who can get others to work together, those who speak in unknown languages. Is everyone an apostle? Of course not. Is everyone a prophet? No. Are all teachers? Does everyone have the power to do miracles? Does everyone have the gift of healing? Of course not. Does God give all of us the ability to speak in unknown languages? Can everyone interpret unknown languages? No! And in any event, you should desire the most helpful gifts." (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

There is enough for every Christian to have plenty to do until Jesus comes.

5. *Teach them*

Everyone needs teaching, to develop their knowledge and understanding, as well as capacity to use their gifts appropriately, for the right outcomes. [We all need to maintain teachable attitudes if we wish to grow and remain relevant.]

A lot of contemporary Christian teaching is mono-cultural, inward looking and organization-centric. What we need is a vision for equipping others to do the work of discipleship, without the cults that grow up around individuals (1 Corinthians 3). Let me explain why, from my days in South America.

I lived in Lima, Peru during a time of rapid church growth across Latin America (catalogued by C Peter Wagner in *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming*, Creation House, 1973). That decade was an exciting time to be involved with the Christian community in the Andean Pact region. Churches were springing up everywhere; it was a veritable "baby boom". Congregations frequently became too large for their premises and needed to break down into manageable sizes. These units were often led by people with little formal Bible training. Some were Sunday school teachers until asked to pastor new congregations – they were one step ahead of everyone else. Others were youth leaders, not long in the Christian faith. A desperate need existed to train workers.

In this environment, expanding Christian communities were vulnerable to false teaching. Sects such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses got among new Christians and drew away unsuspecting believers who were hungry for leadership and spiritual growth, but didn't know the difference. What emerged from this need was a range of practical new training options.

For much of the Christian world, the paradigm of training revolves around Bible College classes, Western teaching methods and professional qualifications. After all, it is argued, who wants to have heart surgery by someone who has only read a high school biology book and thinks he knows, in general terms, where the heart is located? Alternatively, only a fool would entrust his or her financial affairs to someone who barely knows mathematics but has a state-of-the-art calculator. I used to believe that only full-time status as a formally trained pastor or evangelist constituted valid Christian ministry. I now see that this paradigm effectively rules 90% of Christians out of considering God's calling on their lives.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a group of Bible College students some years before I undertook my own theological studies: "Jesus had a Bible College made up of twelve students; you should follow the example of the first disciples and go to seminary; it's what He requires". This little piece of sophistry veiled the fact that Jesus' college was out in the marketplace, where people were born, worked and died; it was not limited to the classroom. Don't get me wrong, I applaud formal qualifications; understanding the complexity of Biblical truth will keep the Christian community from descending into chaos and error. However, the work of Christian ministry is entrusted to all Christians, so there needs to be a broader understanding of the menu of training and service options available.

Today, the "Haggai Foundation" and other equipping ministries are busy facilitating Christian living in the marketplace; assisting believers who want to know how to share their faith with people with whom they interact every day; and equipping Christian leaders with teaching about contemporary issues. When this collaborative approach happens, growth is coordinated and kept on the foundation. In the words of the New Testament:

"You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22 New Living Translation)

This passage is one of my favourites. We are the Body of Christ, a 21st Century "House of God" the Holy Spirit is building on the foundation of Jesus Christ. When we get together the presence of the Holy Spirit is with us – every time. We are like "bricks"; designed to live in dynamic relationship with "other bricks". The love and power of God are the mortar that glues us together.

Without Christ we would be like “foreigners and aliens” to one another. When we come together to celebrate in Jesus’ name we are one. When we plant new churches or build sanctuaries to worship the Lord together we do so as tangible statements about the presence of God and unity of His people in a world filled with uncertainties. Together we are challenged and equipped to go out into the community and touch peoples’ lives with His love and power. Every church building, every Christian community and individual believer should shine like a beacon, a light in the world to dispel the darkness and lead others to the cross and the new life that are ours in Christ.

When growth slides off the foundation the resultant edifice is like the great Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, which I once visited. Soft clay subsoil beneath the city and the removal of water from the soil over recent centuries has caused many of the buildings in central Mexico City to crack and subside, including the Cathedral (the largest Catholic Church in Latin America). Only substantial investments in restorative work have prevented the building from collapsing. Good foundations are critical for the structure. In the Christian community such foundations begin with solid teaching (2 Timothy 2:19).

You have a part to play in helping men and women become effective servants of God and achieve results that will endure for eternity. Get hold of reliable, Biblical material and use it, together with the relationships you have with the Holy Spirit and people, to do so. Use your God-given skills, your background and discernment honed through serving Jesus to see them released to grow the work of God in the world. Teach them how to pray and touch Him. Show them how to hear from the Holy Spirit and be bold in serving Him. Then they will be able to do likewise and the work will multiply and continue. The Family of God will expand and mature exponentially as everyone does their God-given work.

The final word goes to the Apostle Paul, in his second letter to Timothy:

“You have heard me teach many things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Teach these great truths to trustworthy people who are able to pass them on to others. (2 Timothy 2:2)