

Biblical Theology of Discipleship

Equipping *Believers* to Become *Followers*

Ron Braley

PMIN 509: Models of Biblical Discipleship

February 18, 2017

Introduction

There's probably no community-wide calling more important than to produce Christ-following disciples who also reproduce¹. Jesus modeled and commanded it; the disciples and apostles perpetuated the commandment and method. What drives this need for disciple-making?

The vision that drives *my* efforts to obediently disciple others is the need to *equip the Saints*² through training and modeling righteous behavior. This vision has produced a mission to help fill the need by developing a dynamic biblically-based discipleship model. My desire here is to share this personal approach to proven biblical discipleship.

What I'll present describes in greater detail the vision and mission mentioned above within these scopes: (1) My discipleship worldview based on the Bible and research; (2) My discipleship journey, past and present; (3) The future of 'equipping the Saints.' We'll begin with the former, which provides the biblical discipleship foundation and includes my proposed well-supported definition.

The Biblical Foundations of Discipleship

I'll begin by proposing a personal definition of discipleship based on biblical foundations and research before moving to a discussion of the foundations. In this way, the reader can easily hold me accountable for my understanding and application presented in this paper. Perhaps, ultimately, one will glean a well-supported and well-rounded method for obeying Jesus' command to make disciples – imitators of those who have emulated the Christ for millennia. Let's begin with my definition.

¹ Matthew 28:18-20, for instance, NASB (New American Standard Bible).

² cf. Ephesians 4:11-16, NASB.

Discipleship Personally Defined: I define discipleship in this way: “*Equipping God-fearers to be followers of Jesus who retell the Gospel, model righteous behavior per God’s ways and Jesus’ commandments, and expect a mimicking of the same through mentoring and relationships.*”

First, we are indeed commanded and compelled by Jesus and others like the Apostle Paul to ‘equip’ those in covenant with God through the Christ. Who is called to do this? All who follow Jesus. We’re to evangelize the Kingdom of God at hand and teach His ways while modeling certain behavior as *believers-turned-followers*. But how and with whom do we begin?

The ability to be ‘equipped’ implies an inherent belief at a minimum which, as explained by Jesus³ and James⁴, would be useless to God without resulting obedience in retelling the Gospel story and practicing right covenant behavior.

Second, in addition to teaching, we model righteous behavior in an apprenticeship-like relationship.⁵ To do this, we must be knowledgeable of God’s ways, possess changed hearts that have a passion for loving others and following God. We’ve internalized what we’ve passionately learned to the point where we subconsciously and consistently display Godly behavior. However, we could impart nothing without the disciple’s trust. And, the deep trust necessary to accept, model, and display God’s ways would be impossible without a relationship where honesty and transparency abound as explained by Ogden in his “*Climatic Conditions One and Three.*”⁶

Third, the disciple must trust us enough to accept what is often a new way of thinking and be willing to change life-long behaviors⁷. That kind of trust and the openness and confidence necessary for discipleship can happen only in a relationship whereby the disciple believes what

³ John 15:10-14, for instance, NASB (New American Standard Bible).

⁴ cf. James 2:14-26, NASB.

⁵ Billie Hanks, Jr. *Discipleship*, pp 95-96. Hanks does a good job of differentiating between teaching and training, which he calls “*apprenticeship.*”

⁶ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, pp 154 & 168.

⁷ Paul’s admonishment to exhibit self-control in worship and a renewed mind in transformation seem to fit well here. cf. Romans 12:1-2, NASB.

they hear and finds enough value in the instruction and modeling to adopt and internalize both. However, we must conduct the relationship and discipleship within a framework.

A follower of Jesus who discipled another must be more of a mentor than a teacher and needs to set expectations to be successful. While a teacher may impart information, a mentor/trainer will ‘perform’ what they teach and expect the disciple to do the same. In other words, “*Do as I say AND as I do!*” Additionally, the discipleship relationship must operate within certain boundaries or by specific expectations to be successful.⁸

For instance, disciple and trainer must agree to set days and times to study, pray, and meet for discipleship and adhere to them with few exceptions. Adherence shows positive intent and ensures the effort moves forward. Expectations must also include confidence that private revelations will stay that way. And, practicing the biblical disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and accountability (confession) is important for the relationship and discipleship to be successful.

Building blocks of teaching, training, and modeling of Godly behavior within the conduit of relationship and boundaries of expectations and accountability describe my approach to discipleship. But what did *Jesus* say or do about the ‘equipping of the Saints?’ And what have others since Jesus including my contemporaries purported regarding discipleship?

Biblical Foundations and Historical and Contemporary Discipleship Methods. Jesus, the disciples, and the apostles built their approach to discipleship upon several proven building blocks: (1) Focusing on a few loyal and teachable disciples; (2) Giving knowledge; (3) Displaying behavior; (4) Expecting replication; (5) Supervision. We’ll now look at how these appear in biblical, historical, and contemporary discipleship.

⁸ Jesus’ expectations of loyalty, a teachable nature, obedience, and reproduction are reiterated by *Master Plan of Evangelism*, pp 49 & 99

Biblical

We easily see biblical foundations for contemporary discipleship in the way Jesus chose, mentored, supervised, and empowered His disciples. He did so in these stages: (1) Provider of examples expecting imitation; (2) Provocative teacher expecting questions; (3) Supportive coach who produced missionaries; (4) Delegator who produced apostles.⁹ Paul's model was similar.

Sent himself by Jesus, Paul reproduced disciples through training and empowerment in these phases: (1) Model / Imitation; (2) Hero / Identification; (3) Coach / Exhortation; (4) Peer / Participation.¹⁰ In both cases, the disciple maker's motive was clear: Produce disciple-makers and leaders to perpetuate Christianity well beyond their days. And the cycle repeats.

Historical

We know that disciples, apostles, and other mature followers of Jesus evangelized to teach the Gospel and lived and worked among disciples they trained.¹¹ Many wrote letters to not only inform (teach) but also hold disciples accountable – even as they provided guidance from a distance.¹² The level and longevity of intimate training, accountability, and supervision prove the need to mimic and perpetuate Jesus' words and actions.

In fact, the early church by the third and fourth centuries took this charge of perpetual training and accuracy so seriously that baptism was often delayed many weeks while new

⁹ *Transforming Discipleship* figure 4.1; many Biblical references include the first several chapters of Mark, Chapters seven & ten, Chapter nine and Matthew chapter ten, and Mark chapter 14 respectively, NASB (New American Standard Bible).

¹⁰ *Transforming Discipleship* figure 5.1; many Biblical references include 1Corinthians chapter four and Philippians chapter three, 1Thessalonians chapter two, 2Timothy chapter four, and 2Corinthians chapter eight and Philippians chapter two respectively, NASB.

¹¹ e.g. disciples/apostles like Paul, James, John, Barnabas, etc. who made repeated missionary journeys and often remained in various locations for many months or years.

¹² Paul's letters to the churches such as those in Rome, Galatia, Corinth, etc. and other instructional letters such as the Shepherd of Hermas used in corporate training and worship.

converts underwent catechism to ensure they fully understood the covenant they were about to confirm through baptism.¹³ What about now? How do we conduct successful discipleship today?

Contemporary

There's an abundance of resources that corroborate Jesus' discipleship model and offer guidance in implementation. Some teach the model while others provide foundations for the application. What follows are several examples of each beginning with the former.

Dr. Coleman in his *Master Plan of Evangelism* confirms Jesus' biblical discipleship model by explaining that He sought a few loyal men willing to learn who were "a cross section of society in their day."¹⁴ He also reflected that "we live by what we do"; Jesus modeled spiritual disciplines of prayer, the study of Scripture, and soul-winning.¹⁵

In *Cultivating a Life for God*, Neil Cole mentions that "a strong Christian is a reproducing Christian"¹⁶ and explores reasons for today's lack of reproduction including complexity, unrealistic expectations, and inadequacy.¹⁷ Additionally, he confirms the need to keep discipleship groups small (2-3 referred to as Life Transformation Groups)¹⁸ and gives five reasons that include community, accountability, confidentiality, flexibility, and reproducibility.¹⁹

Following Jesus – Biblical Reflections on Discipleship is an excellent work by N T Wright that provides specific guidance in dealing with temptation (necessary for new disciples attempting godliness!);²⁰ it goes together with the need for accountability.

¹³ Oxford Dictionary of World Religions among other texts like those used in Regent's HCHT_501 course.

This confirmation is identical to the Old Covenant confirmation through circumcision.

¹⁴ *Master Plan of Evangelism*, pp 22-24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-76.

¹⁶ *Cultivating a Life for Good*, p 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 28-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 41-44.

²⁰ *Following Jesus*, pp 71-75.

Hans Kvalbein in his article *Go Therefore and Make Disciples* purports several these points. Significant are #4 and #12: (4) “A disciple learns by (a) hearing his Master, and (b) doing like his Master”; (12) “To be a disciple is to be called to make new disciples.”²¹

In *How to Make Your Mark*, Campus Crusade for Christ refers to the work of several works including Robert Coleman’s.²² As such, it provides a holistic approach that addresses the need for multiplication and identifies contemporary obstacles, keeping groups small, and Christian training in obedience.²³ Besides discipleship instruction, one can find many discipleship guides.

Foundation Stones and *First Steps* are examples of excellent resources that provide simple step-by-step guidance in the formation of spiritual disciplines such as evangelism, Bible study, prayer, overcoming temptation, and fellowship among others.²⁴ In the next section, I’ll overview my discipleship journey, which has incorporated many principles covered thus far.

Overview of My Discipleship Journey to Date

Introduction. When people ask about my Christian education or discipleship, I embarrassingly exclaim, “*I went to the Jesus School of Hard Knocks!*” My stubborn nature and a lack of intentional and consistent discipleship resulted in a long, tumultuous journey that witnessed my Christian worldview waffle between the secular, the cultish, and an equally dangerous contemporary entitlement Christianity before clarity finally came. Thankfully, positive and godly influence by a few people early on made possible my eventual path as a child of God.

²¹ Ibid., pp 2 and 7 respectively.

²² *Master Plan of Evangelism*

²³ *How to Make Your Mark*, pp 82-86, 165-179, etc.

²⁴ *Foundation Stones* pp 1-10, 51-64, 87-102, 117-130, 165-176 and *First Steps* lessons 7, 4, 5, 2, and 6 respectively.

Being Discipled. At the age of five years, a wonderful Christian woman and neighbor shared the Gospel and told me Bible stories. Images and thoughts of God and Jesus began to occupy my mind and produce questions that wouldn't be answered until several years later when, beginning at the age of seven, I attended a Christian school at the suggestion of another Christian who would eventually become a foster mother to me. Other models in the discipleship process would begin to emerge within a decade.

Exiting a rebellious period at the age of seventeen, I joined the Air Force and soon after that entered a discipleship relationship with my friend John. Unfortunately, he left within several months, and I became prey to the teachings of prideful individuals and a cult. Eventually, my family attended church regularly; that's where I met Christopher in my mid-thirties.

Significant about my encounters with Christopher is that he challenged my faith and limited understanding of Bible teachings. The study and discipleship that followed changed my heart, life, and family as I grew and assumed spiritual leadership of my home. The roughly 12 years that followed produced an incredible passion and foundation for disciple-making. All the hard knocks were about to pay off!

Discipling Others. Determined to help other Christians who, as I had been, have weak or little faith because of a lack of training and discipleship, I formed a discipleship-focused organization in 2011 and began developing instructional material.²⁵

I created Finding Discipleship²⁶ with a mission to *equip believers to become followers* in response to what I found to be a terrifying training and discipleship void in our Christian culture. In acquiring discipleship tools, I became an authorized First Steps trainer (think 'train the

²⁵ *Finding the End of the World* published in 2011, other pending publications in contract with Xulon Press, website-based training materials (ronbraley.com and findingdiscipleship.org), etc.

²⁶ www.findingdiscipleship.org

trainer’) and still use the workbook extensively in my one-on-one discipleship efforts. As I mentioned above, it’s an excellent resource for guiding a disciple in short-term (10 weeks) spiritual formation; the expectation is that they’ll, in turn, disciple others.

Other discipleship efforts include using materials I’ve developed to teach spiritually-young Christians foundations they should already know but of which they’re unaware. For instance, I conduct a day-long *Crash Course in Partnering with God*. Additionally, I’ve conducted *Train the Trainer seminars* in Africa to equip Bishops, Pastors, and lay membership for disciple-making in their villages.²⁷ But my efforts could be more effective.

As I previously mentioned, teaching and training/mentoring are not the same; both are needed for effective disciple-making as are a long-term approach and relationship that could be as long as several years. In the next section, I’ll explore the future of my disciple-making efforts, which will include modifications to allow for necessary length, flexibility, and relationships.

My Plan to Disciple Others in the Future

I believe that my disciple-making approach must become dynamic, flexible, and relationship-focused. Teaching is important as is training. As such, any discipleship effort must transfer knowledge and model behavior. A single approach such as the First Steps program is inadequate to address all necessary components in all situations. Perhaps a different, balanced disciple-making effort is needed. After all, and according to David Kinnaman, the church needs to: (1) Reconsider how we make disciples; (2) Rediscover Christian calling and vocation; (3) Reprioritize wisdom over information as we seek to know God.²⁸

²⁷ Kenya 2015 and 2016

²⁸ You Lost Me, p 201.

Knowledge Transfer. Because I'm learning that a single teaching program will fall short, I plan to approach knowledge transfer in the following ways depending on the needs of the trainees.

- **Short-term:** Immediate information in small, digestible chunks is necessary for providing a foundation of introductory principles and spiritual formation concepts. For instance, introductions to prayer, dealing with temptation, basic Bible study, etc. must be shared immediately to help guide the disciple. A program like First Steps can excel here. Additionally, I'd put ad-hoc classes to teach concepts or principles such as *Faith, Love, and Hope* or more detailed instruction on Bible study in this category. Instructional material I've developed and seminars like those I mentioned above work well here.
- **Long-term:** Once a disciple has been introduced to important topics such as dealing with temptation, prayer, or Bible study, they must participate in ongoing spiritual formation training. For instance, regular Bible study and training in financial management and health maintenance (physical, emotional and spiritual) are necessary for maturation, spiritual sharpness, and equipping for disciple-making or teaching short or long-term courses.

Modeling. Again, the impartation of knowledge is important; however, we easily forget stuff we hear and learn without practice and internalization. Therefore, the relationship used for teaching must be extended and deepened to allow for the modeling of what we teach. And, as mentioned previously, accountability is necessary for reproducing what we teach and model and in dealing effectively with sin.

The Right Vehicle. Considering that relationship and a dynamic yet simple approach to instruction and training are necessary, I plan to develop a method that resembles Neil Cole's Life

Transformation Groups²⁹ while utilizing different teaching programs. For instance, forming long-term relational small groups (2-3 members) and using the First Steps program and ad-hoc classes while also employing ongoing Bible reading and spiritual formation training will be better than using a single program. Additionally, I'll incorporate a dynamic approach that considers the multi-generational Church a "*partnership of generations fulfilling God's purposes in their time.*"³⁰

Now that I've presented various discipleship foundations, an overview of my discipleship journey, and my discipleship plan for the future, I'll offer final concluding thoughts.

Conclusion

Without the disciple-making of the past two thousand years, no one would understand, internalize, or display godly behavior. We'd live in an 'anything-goes' world with no hope. Fortunately, God in His mercy has given us the means of redemption and perpetual disciple-making; both began with the same life-giving Christ. Thus, we have a redemption story and training in righteousness that will continue despite the work of Satan and the wicked until God inserts Himself into human history to "*make all things new.*"³¹

Whether initial, historical, or contemporary, disciple-making has comprised several common elements: Relationship, flexibility, individual focus, teaching, training, supervision, and accountability. Of these, the honest and transparent relationship is most important and the catalyst that makes training and accountability possible. Because, by that relationship, the disciple will hear and repeat what we say and do what we do, my prayer is that God will abundantly prepare disciple makers to *equip believers to become followers!*

²⁹ *Cultivating a Life for God*

³⁰ *You Lost Me*, p 202.

³¹ Revelation 21:1, 2, & 5 for instance, NASB (New American Standard Bible)

Works Cited

- Campus Crusade for Christ. *How to make Your Mark: A Manual for Evangelism and Discipleship*. ISBN 0-86605-142-2 / 895.
- Cole, Neil. *Cultivating a Life for God*. CMA Resources. eISBN 978-098439308-4.
- Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism* 2nd edit. Grand Rapids: Revell/Baker Publishing Group, 2010. ISBN: 978-0800788087.
- Edwards, Terry *Foundation Stones, A Discipleship Manual for New Believers*, 1999 Christian Equippers International.
- Hanks, Billie Jr., et-al. *Discipleship*. ISBN 0-310-44461-6.
- Kinnaman, David; Hawkins, Aly. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. Baker Publishing Group. ISBN: 978-0801013140. Kindle Edition.
- Kvalbein, H. (1988). Journal: *Go Therefore and Make Disciples ... The Concept of Discipleship in the New Testament*. Themelios, 13(2), 48.
- Ogden, Greg. *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003. ISBN: 978-0830823888.
- Specificity Publications. *First Steps One-on-One Discipleship Workbook*, Third Edition. <http://www.disciplinganother.com/>
- Wright, N. T. (1994). *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. ISBN 0-281-04805-3.