

Rethinking Discipleship: A Framework for Discipleship in Church Planting

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Grace-Centered Discipleship

Final Paper

Discipleship is the lifeblood of the church. Jesus' final command is a call to discipleship:

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

How is the church doing with respect to accomplishing Jesus' final command? Are we making disciples? Jim Peterson, of the Navigators ministry, makes the startling statement at the beginning of his book on discipleship “Thirty years of discipleship programs, and we are not disciplined.”<sup>1</sup>

What has happened to discipleship? How is it that Christianity in America is so shallow, given the accessibility and availability of resources and knowledge? Where is the power of Jesus in the lives of Christians? I need look no further than my own experience and journey in discipleship to see the failure of programs to accomplish Christ's commission. As I trace my own journey in exploring what discipleship is, I can rethink discipleship for the advance of the gospel in the church plant and to see the emergence of a new effective discipleship framework.

### **Discipleship as Program**

Previously, I viewed discipleship as a program. Discipleship was a set body of information, usually the basics of Christianity, taught to a disciple in a structured academic environment. Once a person converted, discipleship was sharing information to produce behavioral conformity to evangelical Christianity. This view was established in my campus ministry experience with a parachurch ministry. In fact, once a person came to faith and went through one semester of Bible study, they were assimilated into a second Bible study which we called a “discipleship group.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Peterson, *Lifestyle Discipleship: The Challenge of Following Jesus in Today's World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 15.

When discipleship is a program, there is a defined beginning and end with a distinct accompanying methodological emphasis. Following the proven methods of discipleship to reach the end goal was key. Deviating from this method was not encouraged. Deep down I knew something was amiss in this one-size-fits-all approach, but I was too young in my faith to articulate it and there were no other presenting alternatives.

I eventual came to see that utilizing a program made the end goal of discipleship not so much following Jesus and becoming like him, but the goal was self-perpetuating the particular parachurch ministry. This goal was accomplished by recruiting laborers from our pool of disciples. Progress in discipleship was more measured by involvement in and commitment to the parachurch ministry, rather than following God's call to give Him glory in whatever vocational sphere into which He has called us.

I knew that there had to be more to discipleship and the Christian life than recruiting staff. In time, I left the parachurch ministry and headed to seminary. My desire was to continue serving in ministry, but I knew I needed to not only grow in biblical knowledge and ministry skill, I needed a new paradigm found in the gospel.

### **Discipleship Not as a Program<sup>2</sup>**

Through seminary and the following years of ministry, I vacillated when it came to discipleship. My past parachurch ministry experience was still my tendency, even though I knew something of the rich diversity of experimental religion. It was because I knew something of the grandeur and sovereignty of God, that I refused to force a program on people. So discipleship was no longer a program I followed, but having lost the intent and structure of a program, I

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<sup>2</sup> “Turning the process of spiritual formation into a program will undermine its very purpose. It is a spiritual process, a process that the church sets in motion to engage the heart, the mind, the will, indeed the whole person, in a lifelong commitment of discipleship.” Robert E. Webber, *Ancient- Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 47.

resorted to a haphazard approach. Having come into contact through seminary with the gospel of grace in a fresh way, I knew discipleship was more than working hard as a Christian and checking off godly behaviors.

During these years in ministry, I frequently met with spiritual hungry Christians and personally directed them spiritually. I would informally ask questions and discern how people were doing. Based on their answers or struggles, I would give some sort of guidance or comfort based on my knowledge of the Scripture. Often I would evaluate a person intuitively to discern what they needed to hear and then gauge the effectiveness of my discipling efforts on how well they listened and obeyed. While this was no longer a rigid program, it was still highly informational. I knew people needed contact with the Word of God and exposure to the truth, but my downfall in terms of discipling effectiveness was becoming an information guru rather than an incarnational reality.

### **Discipleship as Gospel Re-presentation<sup>3</sup>**

If discipleship is not a program, if it is not a body of information, if it is not a class<sup>4</sup> to take, if it is not sitting at the feet of a guru, what is it? Discipleship is presenting and applying the truths of the gospel in a way that cultivates the transforming knowledge of our Savior and results in following him. The knowledge a person gains in knowing and trusting Christ is

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<sup>3</sup> I first heard the phrase “gospel re-presentation” from Bryan Chapell’s lecture during the 2005 *Sacrifice of Praise Worship Renewal Conference*

([http://www.covenantseminary.edu/resource/Chapell\\_WC05\\_WorshipAsGospelRePresentation.mp3](http://www.covenantseminary.edu/resource/Chapell_WC05_WorshipAsGospelRePresentation.mp3)).

In this sense, worship is an aspect of discipleship, which is the point Webber makes: “In worship the unchurched are immersed in truth as the community remembers God’s great acts of salvation, discerns the ways God’s presence and power are now available, and points to the eschatological vision of the new heavens and earth... This kind of worship—worship that proclaims and enacts the gospel so that our relationship with God is rehearsed—speaks to our postmodern way of knowing.” *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 63-64.

<sup>4</sup> Webber offers the following interpretation of “teaching” in Matthew 28:20, “Teaching is not divorced from disciple making; it is not a separate responsibility apart from discipleship, and teaching does not mean a mere intellectual framework.” *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 22.

transformative because of the work of the Holy Spirit<sup>5</sup>. The Spirit's work is to reveal the depths of knowledge (John 17:3), that we would look into the mirror of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:1-6) and see God's glory reflected there. In discipleship the gospel is unfolded and "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3) are discovered in Christ.

Though discipleship can be defined as growth in knowledge, it is not an academic exercise or reducible to book learning. The intimate and relational knowledge that the Spirit uses to transform lives is centered on Christ. Jesus Christ is the gospel by virtue of His position at the center of it.<sup>6</sup> He is the object of our faith (1 Timothy 1:14) and the mediator of the message (1 Timothy 2:5) which is the "power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16).

The New Testament pattern for discipleship is the presentation and re-presentation of all that Christ has accomplished.<sup>7</sup> So to disciple is to teach and model all that Christ has done and will do. To disciple is to remind and explain how the Scriptures proclaim the good news (Isaiah 61:2, Luke 2:11, 4:19) and the implications of that news for godly living. Discipling begins and ends with the good news of the gospel. The gospel is our starting point as the Father effectual calls people towards conversion, and the gospel is our end point as we continually experience the transforming and renewing power of the Spirit by faith in Christ. We start with the gospel in discipleship, we stay with the gospel, and we end this life and begin eternity with the knowledge and power the gospel supplies.

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<sup>5</sup> "One's whole life involves trusting in Christ, who by the Spirit continually transforms us into the likeness of God." Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Smallman, Grace-Centered Discipleship Class Lecture, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, 11 January 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Romans is an example of this pattern of discipleship: Romans was addressed to believers (1:7), the letter begins with a definition of what the gospel is (1:16), this is followed by a depth presentation of the gospel (chapters 1-11), after which the implications of the truth of the gospel are worked out (chapters 12-16). Ibid.

## **Grace-Centered Discipleship**

Having established that the content of discipleship is the gospel in all its riches and depths, what is the method to deliver this knowledge? As a pastor, how do I communicate and apply discipleship as gospel re-presentation in ministry? The starting point is personal repentance. I have too often found myself lacking the faith to trust in the message of the gospel and the means of God to transform people's lives. I must turn away from my confidence in my ineffective and supposed "extraordinary abilities and gifts" and trust in the "ordinary" means of God in the gospel which have the power to "destroy strongholds" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

## **Seeing Myself as a Patient**

Discipling is not about being a guru or modeling the all-together life. Where I have not lived transparently, I have communicated that I do not need a Savior. Instead, I must be convinced of the reality that I am a patient and God has called me to be a physician of souls as well. As I look to care for the souls God has entrusted me with in ministry, I see myself as needing the same cure they do. The remedy that I commend to them in the gospel, is the same remedy I must partake. We must together soak the wounds of our sin, in the living water of the gospel.

Part of being a physician of souls is to carefully examine my own life in the light of Scripture and see where I could be "always able out of Christ's fullness to select the spiritual remedies required."<sup>8</sup> Archibald Alexander noted how he was inspired by the medical students of his day with "the alacrity and perseverance with which [they] attend upon anatomical and physiological lectures" and how "the men of this profession make experiments are highly worthy

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Vol II, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 213-215, quoted in Stephen Smallman, *The Pastor as Physician of the Soul*. Grace-Centered Discipleship class notes.

of imitation.”<sup>9</sup> Such effort is doubly worthy of pastors today that we might see the Great Physician cure people’s souls through “inculcat[ing] clearly, fully, and practically, the grace of God as manifested in the Gospel.”<sup>10</sup> For until I learn this skill I can expect “no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians”<sup>11</sup> or in myself.

### **Becoming a Spiritual Midwife**

In gospel discipleship, my primary role is to facilitate and assist in the work of the Holy Spirit in another person’s life. In this role, I am believing that God is already at work by the Holy Spirit in effectual calling or in sanctification (depending on whether a person is a Christian). This knowledge gives me tremendous confidence in the transformative power of God to affect change in spite of my failings and inability.

The Spiritual Birthline<sup>12</sup> graphically displays the spiritual reality that there is a process or gestation period where the Lord is bringing people to Himself. This gestation period culminates in the new birth experienced in conversion (John 3:3). However, by understanding God’s place in the process we are cured of our arrogance and confusion because we know we are not able to do that which only God can accomplish. Just as the midwife does not create the life or cause the birth, the spiritual midwife is primarily a facilitator of a process initiated and governed by God alone.

The Spiritual Birthline also helps to erase some of the false distinction that has arisen between evangelism and discipleship. This false distinction prevents people from knowing that the power that brought them to Christ, is the same power they need to live for him. In representing the gospel, we are giving someone more of what they truly need. It was the power of

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<sup>9</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, Third Edition, (London: Billing and Sons, 1967), 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Smallman, *Spiritual Birthline: Understanding How We Experience the New Birth*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

God through the gospel which saved them, and it will be the power of God through the gospel which sanctifies them. Starting with the gospel and staying with the gospel is the reality explained in Colossians 2:6-7: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

### **The New Discipleship**

The new view of discipleship as gospel discipleship or gospel re-presentation puts on emphasis on a “depth presentation of the gospel.”<sup>13</sup> This is the presentation and the re-presentation and application of the fullness of all that Christ has done and will do in the life of a believer. The Spiritual Birthline is a helpful tool here. The Birthline assists in helping a person grasp all that God is doing in their life, no matter where they are at spiritually. In addition, I can present the Birthline and ask where a person is in their spiritual pilgrimage as a diagnostic and, in listening to them, build a relationship and get to know them on a deeper level. Spiritual Birthline interpretation is soaking in the gospel as I assist people in recognizing God’s work in their life.

Giving myself to gospel discipling, begins with the Spirit enabling me to “be a man whose inner life has been gripped through and through by the message of the Cross.”<sup>14</sup> In being gripped by the cross, I can become the pacesetter, “who motivates an ingrown church to outreach by setting the example.”<sup>15</sup> How does this happen? It is a transforming work of the Spirit who utilizes the meditation on gospel truths in Scripture, prayer, and faith-filled experience in ministry, to revive my own heart and renew my pastoral and leadership abilities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 72-74, referenced in Stephen Smallman, *A Vision for Renewal*, Grace-Centered Discipleship class notes, 13 January 2006.

<sup>14</sup> C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 115.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

As I lead out from being centered on the gospel and Christ, the effect overflows into the faith community of the church plant. Our confidence rests with God's Sovereign calling, so we are engaged in the process of seeing faith form in others. We do not feel the pressure to coerce or manipulate decisions for Christ, but give people the freedom to belong before they believe.<sup>17</sup> We can be tremendously open and hospitable as a church plant, and yet maintain our commitment to the "exclusive nature of the Christian faith."<sup>18</sup>

When we embrace our calling as a faith forming community, the distinction between evangelism and discipleship disappears. People are welcomed into the process of becoming a follower of Jesus and we affirm that how we come to Christ is how we live for him. Our emphasis shifts from narrowly defined Damascus road type testimonies to embracing diversity in the process of coming to faith.<sup>19</sup> We shepherd and midwife the people who are in process from the understanding that both the greatest resource for evangelism and the greatest resource for discipleship is the gospel.

### **Gospel Discipling in a Church Plant**

Applying this new and biblical view of discipleship to the church plant is especially important. I come into contact with many new people of unknown spiritual experience and belief. One of the most important things I can ask a person is where they are at in their spiritual pilgrimage. This is a great beginning point for conversation and listening to the answer is a way to express care and build a relationship.

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<sup>17</sup> "The missional church... evangelizes primarily by immersing the unchurched in the experience of community... the medium [of evangelism] is the community of believers themselves." Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> The Apostle Paul's conversion "has provided the model of what Christian conversion is supposed to be like." This taken with the fact of "how we conceive of conversion determines how we do evangelism," leaves us little room for allowing time for people to reflect on their spiritual state even though conversion for the twelve was "a process that unfold[ed] over time." Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 19, 286.

In this current gathering phase of the church plant, I have rethought discipleship and developed a strategy of gospel-discipleship that emphasizes the Scripture, prayer, and kingdom. This new approach arose in part because of the importance that each interaction I have with someone is a discipling experience. I call this “discipling in the moment” or DIM for short. Discipling in the moment is a way of discipling without a program that sees Christians and non-Christians brought closer to their Savior over the course of the conversation or interaction.

DIM arose because I realized that when I meet a new person, I do not know what kind of contact and interaction I will have with them in the future, if at all. I also realized my obligation and duty as a minister of Jesus Christ to see some good come of our meeting together regardless of the prospects for the church plant. Rather than make a high pressure sales presentation about the church plant or force feed them a four point outline of the gospel, I move forward in faith actively listening for where the three DIM components can be applied. The three DIM components are the Scripture, prayer, and kingdom.

DIM is my way as a church planter of gospel discipling when I do not yet have a congregation. I am serving as a spiritual midwife trusting that God will use our interaction to take the other person one step closer to Him and into a fuller embracing of the gospel. When I am discipling in the moment (“DIMing”), authentic ministry and shepherding are carried out and I am truly concerned for their spiritual state, even though I do not know their future commitment to the church plant or if I will see them again.

### **The Place of Scripture in Gospel Discipling**

Since we understand discipleship as gospel re-presentation, and we understand that as a church planter I do not have a committed congregation, then we must know that the content for a depth presentation of gospel happens in the moment through the Scripture. The Scripture as the

Word of Truth is a principle means the Spirit uses in sanctification (John 17:17). The Scripture must be preached, meaning that “God’s redemptive work [must be] the content, the motive, and the power behind all biblical exposition.”<sup>20</sup> For until “people look beyond themselves for spiritual health do they find their sole hope and source of power to do what God requires.”<sup>21</sup>

Not only must the Scripture be preached, but also the Scripture must fill my DIM conversations so that disciples can look beyond themselves for understanding and integration. God uses His Word to call people to believe (Romans 10:17, Galatians 3:2) and His Word is the interpreter of our experience (2 Timothy 1:9). One of the goals of discipleship is to stop living for ourselves and start living for our Savior. When we seek to understand our life through the lens of God’s Word, our self-orientation is challenged and kingdom priorities become a possibility for us to pursue.

Both in preaching and conversation, I have been impressed with the need to be biblical in discipleship. This means to point people to the Scripture for answers, to read the Scripture to people, and to guide people in looking at the Scripture for God’s plan and purposes. Scripture is at the heart of gospel discipling because it contains the transformative content the Spirit uses to make disciples.

### **The Place of Prayer in Gospel Discipling**

If Scripture is the content of gospel discipling, then prayer is the power for pursuing gospel discipling. Over familiarity with the message of the gospel<sup>22</sup>, apathy, confusion, and demonic forces—all obstacles which disciples struggle with—are best addressed when I engage in prayer (Mark 9:29). So often I am tempted to trust and rely on my own resources: verbiage,

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<sup>20</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 310, quoted in Stephen Smallman, *The Pastor as Physician of the Soul*. Grace-Centered Discipleship class notes.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Peace explains this problem with encounter evangelism (see *Conversion in the New Testament*, 296).

personality, and gifting rather than the power of God to make His message through the Scripture clear and evident to a disciple in the moment of ministry.

In my current setting in a church plant, I am meeting new people every day. Before I meet with people, as I meet with people, when I shake hands, when I am listening to them, I should engage in prayer for them. I can also pray for them when I share the Spiritual Birthline and hear their story. I can praise God for His work in their life through prayer and I can pray over the Scripture passages I will preach and teach. In praying, the power for gospel discipleship is brought to bear in ministry.

### **The Place of Kingdom in Gospel Discipling**

The third and final component to gospel discipling is the kingdom of God. The Scripture is the content for gospel discipling, prayer is the power for gospel discipling, and kingdom is the purpose for gospel discipling. Participating in the advancement of the kingdom is where discipleship leads and requires that the disciple maker is an expert in how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of people. It is my role in discipleship to listen, observe, and biblically guide how a disciple can connect with kingdom involvement.

Kingdom involvement connects the content of discipleship with the “nations” of Matthew 28:19. Sitting with people and talking through the implications of the gospel leads to a transformational and missional conclusion that affects family, friends, colleagues, community, city, country, and the world. Inviting people to participate in the advancement of God’s kingdom is where they can be challenged to grow in their reliance upon God as they come into contact with the truth of the gospel.

In the fuller context of kingdom involvement, the disciple orients his life with Christ at the center and is propelled outward in ministry. This centering on the King of the kingdom

provides a continual energy of renewal for discipleship that scatters disciples in purposeful living and gathers them again around the Savior to push outward in power (Acts 8:4).

## **Conclusion**

In ministry I have made the journey of discipleship from a one-size-fits-all rigid program to rethinking that approach and seeing emerge a biblical and theoretical framework which is flexible and applicable to any person. At the current time, I apply this framework by discipling in the moment, because a committed congregation has yet to arise in the church plant.

The components of Scripture, prayer, and kingdom are not part of a program and are not sequential. This allows for the components of gospel discipling to be presented in any order and to overlap. For example, we can begin discipleship with an invitation to join in kingdom purposes (a mission trip), followed by the Scriptural basis (John 3:16) , and both driven into the heart by prayer (“Thy kingdom come...”).<sup>23</sup> A hierarchy of discipleship and Christian pride are easily avoided since the discipleship process can be started at any point, is perpetual, and less structured.

Discipleship is vital to any church ministry. I have been challenged by studying discipleship to seek in ministry to make disciples and not just converts. I have been challenged to enter into the process with people to assist in the Holy Spirit’s shaping them into Christlikeness. I have been inspired to seek to obey Christ’s last command using the means he gives to see him glorified.

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<sup>23</sup> My other two classmates expressed in their testimonies how they took mission trips before they become believers.

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