

Launching a Totally New (And Totally Old) Approach to Discipleship

Matt 4:18-22, Matt 9:9

Someone recently sent me an email listing all the phrases and words that have gone the way of the dinosaur. What scared me is that I knew most of them! A lot of these phrases are just outdated like "heavens to Mergatroyd" and "I'll see you in the funny papers". But some of the phrases are obsolete due to changing times and advance technology: "Don't touch that dial". Or "Carbon copy". Carbon copy originally referred to a paper coated with a thin layer of wax and pigment that as you wrote or typed the original simultaneously made a copy. We actually do use the phrase carbon copy today, but many of us probably don't know it: on our emails we have a CC function and a BCC – which stands for carbon copy and blind carbon copy, but if you're like me you just think of it as "cc'ing" someone, not carbon copying someone. Other outdated phrases mentioned were "You sound like a broken record" and "I just got hung out to dry". Changing times and advancing technology have gutted these terms of their meaning.

Let me ask a hard question of us as a church: do we need to add the word "discipleship" to the list of terms that changing times and changing culture has rendered outdated? Over the years there have been a lot of books on discipleship and multitudes of discipleship programs but somehow the methods they promote don't seem to fit well with today's society. The concept in many of them is for a believer who is more mature in his or her walk with the Lord to ask a less mature believer to meet with them weekly for Bible study and thereby "disciple" them. If you're really serious you'll end by asking a bunch of accountability questions with the last question being, "have you just lied to me?"

When everything clicks, this can be definitely be a great way to help a believer grow in their faith, and a great way to build relationally, but a lot of times everything doesn't click and the end result is more discouragement than discipleship. Brandon Cook and Bill Hull wrote a booklet called *The False Promise of Discipleship* and Brandon describes his own experience with this approach:

I grew up in the church and walked through a string of discipleship programs. Usually they involved reading the Bible and talking about whatever I (or we) were struggling with. The assumption seemed to be that if we just read more and tried harder, we could get ourselves in order and live real, effective lives for Jesus...But I always left the program with the feeling that I wasn't quite there and that I needed to try harder...

Then he writes: *Ultimately I ended up resenting the entire process because I could never "get there".*¹

Many years ago, Matt Slack and I launched a discipleship program and we asked about a dozen men to commit to 6 months of intensive discipleship. To launch it, we had a lunch with the men and the wives, and I remember saying to the wives "say goodbye to the husband you've known, because from this day forward he's not going to be the same man you've known." It was a great time and I think beneficial, but at the end of it, I think the wives wanted their money back, cause they got the same husband back.

Across the landscape there are far too many who have tried a string of discipleship programs only to drop out disillusioned. And countless more who have seen the people who have gone through these type of programs and weren't particularly impressed with the results. Has discipleship become an outdated term that some churches repeat like a broken record, but should be hung out to dry? We only need to turn to Matt. 28 for the answer. Jesus said *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to*

¹ Bill Hull and Brandon Cook, *The False Promise of Discipleship*, pg. 7

*me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in^[b] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matt 28:18-20*

The church’s task of making disciples will never be obsolete until the day Jesus returns. But maybe we need to take a second look at what a disciple is, and how we are to make disciples. Maybe as a church we need to launch a new approach (that’s really an old approach) to discipleship. By no means do I claim to have all the answers or that we’re going to tie it all up with a bow in one or two messages. I think this is something we’re going to be wrestling with for a while – maybe forever. But I do hope that we can take a fresh look at Jesus’ command to make disciples and I want to credit Hull and Cook for encouraging a fresh approach to this important issue.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John and Matthew and others, he called them to follow him. Talk about launching! These men launched away from life as they had known it (fishing, tax collecting – their vocations) and into a new life of following Jesus. And what Jesus did was he met with these 12 disciples every day in the local coffee shop called Heavenly Chalice, and they talked about how they were doing as disciples and where they were struggling, and then Jesus closed the meeting by asking them, “have you just lied to me?” And most of the time you could count on Judas being the one admitting he had.

Just kidding. We know that is NOT what discipleship looked like! They launched into an action-oriented lifestyle that included a lot of teaching, but teaching that always expressed itself in action. Obviously Jesus was an itinerant teacher who traveled the countryside teaching and preaching and doing miracles so there are some things about the way Jesus did it and the context he did it in that we can’t completely duplicate. But it’s worth asking: have we replaced Jesus’ approach to discipleship with an approach that doesn’t consistently produce disciples but more often leaves us discouraged and disillusioned with the process?

Before we can answer the question how do we make disciples I think we need to ask, what is a disciple? What is the goal of discipleship?

What is the goal of discipleship?

When I was about 14 years old, my father and I spent a year living on a 34 foot ketch rig sailboat. Most of our sailing was close to land, just off the coast or in the Long Island bays, but once we sailed to Block Island and back, each of which was a four hour trip in the open ocean where most of the time we couldn’t see land in any direction. It was vital that we knew the coordinates for where we were going and kept the boat headed on those coordinates or we would miss the island completely and risk getting lost at sea. Or at least ending up in a place we didn’t want to be.

What are the coordinates for discipleship? What is the goal of discipleship? I think many of us might answer something like, getting closer to Jesus and becoming more mature in my Christian walk. So we set the coordinates on me getting closer to Jesus. But is it possible that one of the problems with our approach is that our discipleship coordinates are set on “me”.

- Me getting closer to Jesus
- Me learning more about the Bible

- Me doing what the Bible says more than I am
- Me being a better Christian
- Me feeling that I know God more

These are all good goals for sure, but is it possible that what we call discipleship is just too me-focused? We are just too focused on ourselves and the big discipleship question becomes “how am I doing?” How am I doing at getting closer to Jesus...learning the Bible...doing what the Bible says...being a better Christian...witnessing for Jesus...etc. For most of us, we don't ever feel like we're doing all that great so we get frustrated with ourselves (why do I keep falling short?) or we get frustrated with our church (why aren't they discipling me?). And so discipleship meetings are where we share where we struggling with stuff. “I'm not reading my Bible that much...I'm having a hard time conquering my anger...I'm struggling with witnessing...I'm really not praying that much...”

Again, please don't misunderstand me, all these things can be very valid and helpful questions. But if these are the coordinates we set for discipleship, are we really just sailing to “Me Island”? And does this really lead to much change in our lives? There is a paradoxical life principle that God has built into life: when we live for ourselves and focus on ourselves, our lives get small and miserable. When we live for others, and focus on others, our lives get bigger and happier. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive and if we find our life we lose it, but if we lose our life (give our lives away) for his sake, we find it.

Maybe discipleship isn't about me growing closer to Jesus, becoming a better Christian, growing in maturity, as much as it is about a life lived for others. Boom! Eyes off ourselves and onto how we can serve and bless others. The two commandments are loving God and loving our neighbor. CS Lewis said, humility is not thinking less of yourself, its thinking of yourself less. Maybe the coordinate for discipleship begins with forgetting about ourselves in favor of a life lived for others. We'll talk more about that next week.

If in discipleship we set our coordinates on “me” we will either end up frustrated (I never measure up) or proud (look how great I am compared to other people). But there's another potential problem here. What Hull and Cook call the Human Paradigm. This is how they describe it:

*The Human Paradigm is endemic to most religious systems and beyond that, to the human heart, where it gets its start. It's based on the idea that if we do A, B, and C, we can earn X.*²

X marks the spot we all want to get to. Every human being has an X. It might be financial success, fame, having a loving family, have a nice home, living a meaningful life, or living a fun-filled life. Whatever you think will bring your life happiness and meaning, that is your X. For the Christian X marks the elusive “I've arrived as a mature Christian disciple.” The formula is simple: if we do certain things we will get certain results. In many areas of life, this is just a practical reality. If you want good grades, you have to study hard. If you want to get promoted, you have to work hard. If you want to be healthy you have to eat right and exercise. If you want to get out of debt, you have to change the spending habits that got you into debt. And in many good spiritual things this is also how God has set things up to work. If you want your life aligned with God, you need to know His word. So there are a lot of verses about meditating and memorizing and applying His word. Ps 119:9 for instance gives counsel to the young man (or woman)

² Ibid, pg. 10

who wants to live a pure life: *How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.* You could say, if you want X (a pure life) you need to do A: live your life according to God's word.

So there is a natural cause and effect that we all live with: if we do A we're going to get a different result than if we don't do A. But deep in the human heart is this elusive X that we never quite get our hands on. You have an X that you think, if you could work hard enough, run fast enough, or get lucky enough to have, you'd be happy. We think, if I had X (whatever your X is), my life would be a) happy b) fulfilled c) satisfied d) full of meaning. For one person, it's "if I had a job that paid more. Or that I enjoyed." For another person, "if I had a husband or wife I'd be happy." For another person it's "if I had deeper relationships" and so on. We are always chasing an X. Running after the elusive X. When we get something and it doesn't give us the happiness, satisfaction, meaning that we thought it would, we come up with another X and run after that. X marks the spot.

If we allow this human paradigm of chasing X to become our approach to discipleship, we are constantly running and working to arrive at a spiritual place where we feel close to God, where we feel spiritually mature, and effective in our witness, and so on. We're trying to arrive at a place where we feel like we've arrived in our walk with God. And just like if we work hard enough we expect to be promoted at work, if we disciple hard enough we expect God to reward us and be close to us because we've attained X – we've arrived at the place of discipleship that God wants us to be at.

Two problems when this Human Paradigm becomes our approach to discipleship. First, discipleship isn't an arrival, it's a journey. Jesus said follow me and he never says stop. Discipleship is a lifetime journey of following Jesus. We never arrive this side of eternity.

More troubling though is when the human paradigm is applied to discipleship it begins to sound a lot like legalism. If you attain such and such a level of discipleship *then* you will be close to God and He will be pleased with you and will really love you. Even if we don't say it, subconsciously discipleship becomes a way of wrestling blessings from God's hand. Discipleship is our best effort to get "in" good with God.

True discipleship isn't based on the Human Paradigm; it's based on the Jesus Paradigm! We don't earn the Kingdom, Jesus gives us the Kingdom. Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Luke 12:32 At the cross, there are no rungs to climb to get into God's good grace because by God's good grace we are in God's good grace! God's kingdom economy isn't about earning, it's about abiding. Living in God's generous grace. Hull and Crook write:

A disciple, then, is someone who, grounded by grace and guided by the Holy Spirit, is increasingly rooted in an understanding and experience of how generous God is—and how God has given us a new identity based not on our performance but on His [extravagantly] generous acceptance.³

You don't need to grow as a disciple to grow close to God – by virtue of faith in Christ you are already close to God. Not by human effort but by Jesus' glorious work on the cross. So the first question of discipleship, instead of being "how am I doing?" should be, "God, how could you be so good to me?" Everyday waking up with amazement that God has been so loving, so accepting, so generous to us. To you. To me. Instead of running to get to that elusive X that marks the spot where all is good, we rest in the cross where all is good. Of course, discipleship includes important things like Bible reading, prayer, growing in righteousness, but we need to be careful that we don't get our eyes focused on what we're doing, or think the goal of discipleship is simply an improved me. The basis of discipleship is what Christ

³ Ibid, pg. 19

has done, and the flow of discipleship is always to be outward. We need to be careful our lives don't become a spiritual cul de sac, but a spiritual on ramp for others. Next week I want us to look at two more questions that help us in being and making disciple.

1. How am I doing with loving others?
2. What is God speaking to me by His Word and Spirit, and how am I responding to what He's saying?

But this morning, let's lay aside our human efforts to earn God's love and get in good with God and bask in the knowledge that we are in good with God through Christ. Let's marinate in the amazing truth of God's goodness and generosity to us. "I don't deserve it, though" you say? Join the club. That's grace. That's Christ.