

Discipleship

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Introduction

It should be easier than telling someone about your favorite television program. It should be easier than sharing your enthusiasm for a particular team. It should be easier than liking something on Facebook. It certainly is more important and invites others into a life-changing experience. Telling another person about God's love in Jesus Christ and the difference that has made in your life should be the easiest thing of all.

But most of us have not found it to be easy. We worry about what to say. We wonder how our words will be received. We are uncomfortable talking about ourselves. We are concerned about intruding into another's space. And we certainly don't want to sound judgmental.

Yet what could be more rewarding than guiding someone else to the abundant life of grace and love that we have come to know in Jesus Christ? What could be more significant than leading someone to the source of life's meaning and purpose? What could be more joyful than welcoming someone into the body of Christ, the community of faith? What could be more fulfilling than cooperating with God's healing and reconciling work?

The resources *Engage: Gospel*, *Engage: Discipleship*, and *Engage: Mission* have been created to make sharing the good news of Jesus Christ just a bit easier. Putting in a good word for Jesus, especially among people needing to hear that word, is never easy. But joining together to share our faith openly, to enlarge our understanding, to connect our stories with God's redemptive story, to practice various approaches, and to encourage and pray for one another will make our call to be evangelists easier.

Yes, you are called to be an evangelist! You are called to share your faith in Jesus Christ and to serve others in his name. You are called to embody and proclaim love in the midst of fear, life in the midst of death, and hope in the midst of despair. You are called to share a passion for the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. It may not be the easiest thing you have been called to do, but it is by far the most rewarding. Grace and peace to you!

Boyd Lien

Discipleship Is Continuing Christ's Ministry

Scripture

Matthew 28:16–20 The Great Commission

Acts 1:1–11 The ascension of Jesus

Acts 2:42–47 Life together in Christ

Prayer

Faithful God, you have called us to follow you and to make disciples for Jesus. Even as we are called to make disciples, we are also called to be growing and faithful disciples ourselves. We ask that you would mold us and shape us into the very image of Jesus Christ by the pouring out of your Holy Spirit upon us. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Encounter

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.¹

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? The Greek word *mathetes* is the word that Scripture uses for "disciple," and it means "learner-follower." A disciple learns to follow and learns by following; Jesus' disciples learn to follow Jesus and learn by following Jesus. And what do they learn? Disciples, or apprentices of Jesus, learn to live a life informed and empowered by the life of Christ so that they may be equipped to continue his ministry.

Discipleship is all about living a life connected to God through Christ and to all of God's children. It is the life Jesus lived, a life connected by the love of God. We want to live this same kind of life because Jesus' deep love for

1. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1956), 403.

us causes us to love and desire him above all else. The key to discipleship is remaining connected to the one who loves us.

Engage: Discipleship seeks to call, train, inspire, and support disciples of Jesus Christ. The seven gatherings, each grounded and inspired by a story of discipleship found in the Acts of the Apostles, are intended to revive our call to serve as Christ's disciples, to strengthen our abilities to witness to him, to enhance the ways we call others to discipleship, and simply to enjoy life together in the body of Christ.

Explore

At the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks these words:

“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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

At the beginning of the book of Acts, Jesus blesses and commissions the disciples with similar words.

Read Acts 1:1–11 to explore the story of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples.

In departing from his disciples—the ones he had called, trained, equipped, and prayed for—Jesus leaves them with work to do. They are to continue his earthly ministry. They are to be his witnesses everywhere. Imagine the responses of those who had once been close companions of Jesus but now are left on their own. Yet far from being alone, they are promised power and guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus ascended to heaven after “giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles” (Acts 1:2). Jesus had devoted his entire ministry to giving instructions to the disciples who gathered around him, especially the Twelve he called. By observing, learning, listening, paying attention, and working alongside him, they came to know the heart of Jesus. They were equipped to continue his ministry: “You will be my witnesses” (1:8). The content of their witness, their words and actions, includes the astounding news of Jesus' resurrection: the good news of life in the kingdom of God, the forgiveness of sin and God's redeeming love, and the invitation to live life in ways that reconcile and restore.

The instructions of Jesus found in the Gospels provide the heart of the disciples' witness. Many of these instructions you may already know: how we are to love God and love our neighbor; how we are to pray, offer our worship, and serve others. Some of Jesus' teachings are easy to grasp; others are more difficult to understand. All of his instructions are intended to train his disciples to live their lives in the same manner as Jesus lived his life.

Jesus' instructions from the Gospels live on through the written testimonies shared by Christ's disciples through the ages. These testimonies will continue in what we share as disciples of Christ at this particular time and place among these particular people.

Engage

Discipleship is about growing and maintaining a relationship with God. The Jewish people of Jesus' day had developed a way of knowing God. Their elementary school experience involved memorizing the first five books of the Bible. That's right: they memorized Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy! Middle school involved memorizing much of the rest of what we know as the Old Testament. Then, the best and the brightest would apply to learn from a rabbi. If the rabbi believed the student could live and share his life, that is, take on his yoke, then the rabbi would invite the student to follow and learn from him. A student not yoked to a rabbi would learn the family business.

Where did Jesus find his disciples? They were already at work in the family business. They were not the best of the best! But Jesus invited them to take on his yoke (Matthew 11:28) because he believed they could live his life and share his ministry. Jesus believes that *we* can live his life! Jesus believes that we can serve others and share our faith in ways that change our communities and world. God gives us a community of faith in which we can grow up to live Jesus' life and continue his ministry.

The experiences of the earliest Christians provide a description of the essentials needed to grow as disciples of Jesus.

Read Acts 2:42–47 to read about life together in the early church.

From Scripture we discover the essentials of a disciple-making community: prayer, Bible study, community, breaking bread together, worship, and sharing all things in common. This Holy Spirit-inspired community leads us more fully into God's love and helps us recognize what God is doing to transform our lives. Through this community, we live into our purpose by living Jesus' life. Dallas Willard writes, "The 'Christ focus' is sustained and developed by shaping our lives, with his help, around definite

and time-proven practices that enable us to be kingdom people: to live in the presence and to obey his teachings from the inside out.”²

Discipleship is learning to live the rabbi’s life! When we examine the life of our church, in what ways are we helping people to engage Scripture and apply it to their lives? How is prayer practiced as an essential way of connecting with God? How is our community accountable to one another in this new way of life? In what ways are we reaching out to our community with Christ’s love? By practicing the key essentials of worship, fellowship, learning, and serving, communities of faith produce people who live together the life of Jesus.

Express

The following question, or one similar to it, is asked of new disciples when they unite with the church as members:

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love, to your life’s end?

I will, with God’s help.³

It is the question once asked of you. What do you remember about your life at the time you responded “yes” to that question? What other disciples surrounded you on that occasion? Who was there to support you, pray for you, and partner with you in the gospel? As you reflect on the time from that enthusiastic “yes” until now, it is beneficial to assess how you have sought to keep your promises.

In what ways have you been “Christ’s faithful disciple”?

At what times have you been aware of “obeying his Word and showing his love”?

2. Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 159.

3. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 499.

It is also beneficial at the beginning of *Engage: Discipleship* to complete a simple inventory. Significant change often happens after we take stock of our lives and determine to do something about them. Using the four essentials of worship, fellowship, learning, and serving, complete the following disciple-making inventory:

Worship

In what ways is worship challenging and equipping you for discipleship?

How do you engage in prayer, both personally and within the community?

What are your expectations and hopes for your prayer and devotional life?

What spiritual disciplines do you practice that help draw you closer to God, and are you contemplating others?

Fellowship

In what ways are you involved in supporting and enjoying the church's fellowship?

Who are the people and groups with whom you would like to deepen your friendships in the future?

Where in the church do you receive support, encouragement, and guidance for your discipleship?

Do you have specific ideas about building and strengthening community within the church?

Learning

In what ways are you rooting your life in Bible study and other Christian education offerings?

What are the educational settings where you are growing in faith and understanding?

Are there some significant insights you have come to learn about yourself and your call to discipleship?

Are you sensing a particular inward or outward calling that is leading you to discover more?

Serving

In what ways are you using your gifts in serving through the ministry of our church?

Is there a current ministry or new ministry in which you would you like to serve?

Where is God calling you to serve? What is a gift you offer in serving?



Pray. This week in your prayers, remember with thanksgiving all those who have supported you in faith and encouraged you in discipleship. Open your heart, and pray that God will do a new thing through you. Offer prayers of gratitude for your church—for all those called, gathered, and empowered through Christ. Pray that God will do a new and wonderful thing through all of you.