

The Importance of Evangelism and Discipleship...but Especially Discipleship

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Discipleship is a practice that has been around for centuries and widely used in ministry settings. The practice itself is very connected with evangelism, which is another practice that has been around for centuries and is widely used in ministry. Both concepts, evangelism and discipleship, are essential and work together to expand the knowledge and understanding of the Gospel of Christ. However, discipleship is more important because it is what keeps people who have been exposed to the Gospel engaged with what was first shared with them, and evangelism cannot occur unless someone who is willing to evangelize others has been disciplined already.

There can be many different definitions of discipleship, however they all have the same overarching themes. Generally speaking, discipleship is when you walk with people where they are at in their faith journey to teach them and show them who Christ is and what his role is in the Gospel. It is “followers of Jesus in faith communities who have been called and sent to bear witness.”¹ While this is a broad definition, it does allow for there to be multiple ways to disciple to others. Discipleship is something that can happen one-on-one, in small groups, during a Sunday morning sermon, and even just in sharing everyday life with others. The whole point of discipleship is to build genuine relationships with others so that they might be able to mirror the life of Christ in some way.² There is no one way to go about discipleship, however the basic idea of working with someone and teaching them is still present in every means of discipleship. In addition, the one discipling is already evaluating the life of Christ so they can effectively share that with others.

Even though discipleship is more important than evangelism, there is still an important link between the two. Discipleship is the result of someone already being evangelized to. Therefore, it

¹ Hewitt, *Evangelism as Discipleship*, 201

² Hewitt, *Evangelism as Discipleship*, 201

is almost impossible to have discipleship without evangelism. One might say that evangelism is more important than discipleship then because without evangelism, there is no discipleship. However, without discipleship there is no point to evangelize to nonbelievers, which would leave evangelism to be futile. This makes discipleship more important because it is the continuation of evangelism. It is what keeps people engaged with the Gospel they were shown. While it does not make sense to have evangelism without discipleship, it is almost impossible to have discipleship without evangelism, thus starting the never-ending loop of trying to have one without the other.

Discipleship is not a concept that was just thought of in recent years. It is something that has been around for hundreds of years, even back to Christ's time. In the Bible it is seen that Christ did in fact disciple many people during his life, especially his core group of disciples, and as Christians today we have the same call. It is also shown throughout scripture that discipleship was a very important practice in believers' lives, and especially Christ's life.

One of the most important places we see discipleship discussed is Matthew 28:16-20. Jesus Christ is talking to the disciples and telling them to "go and make disciples"³ and "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."⁴ This is Christ expecting his disciples to go and share what they have learned and to teach others. Teaching is very central to our understanding of discipleship today, and it can clearly be seen that Christ expects his disciples to go and teach.

In the Bible love is the most important command we are given as Christians. In Luke 10:27, the Bible explains that loving God and your neighbor are the most important commands Christians

³ Matthew 28:19 (NIV)

⁴ Matthew 28:10 (NIV)

are given.⁵ Christ shares another effective way of discipleship through love in John 13:34-35. Christ says you must “love one another. As I have loved you”⁶ and this is how others “will know that you are my disciples.”⁷ Love is one of the best ways to show the Gospel of Christ to others. Christ loved those that even society would not love. This is part of walking with people where they are in their faith journey. We are to love all people, but part of discipleship means loving those who society would typically not love. Christ was our example for this and exemplifies this through many encounters with others.

Christ was very good about walking and meeting people where they were at, even those that society had deemed outcasts. He met people where they were, even when they were looked down upon. Christ even went one step further and still loved them, which in turn was an example of Christ sharing the Gospel with them because an important part of the Gospel is love. In Mark 2:13-17, Christ is seen eating with a tax collector, someone who was very much looked down upon by others. Many people questioned why Christ did this and he responded with ““It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.””⁸ Christ shows us that loving others and discipling them is not limited to those who are in the church and have been Christians for a long time, and who have ideas and knowledge about the Gospel. We also learn from Christ that we are to love those who don’t know a whole lot. This is the only way we are able to teach more people. It is important to

⁵ Luke 10:27 (NIV)

⁶ John 13:34 (NIV)

⁷ John 13:35 (NIV)

⁸ Mark 13:17 (NIV)

interact with those who are seen as less than to society because they also need to be taught about the Gospel.

While loving people is very important to discipleship, it is also important to be able to talk to others to disciple them. It is difficult and almost impossible to disciple someone and share the Gospel with them if you are unable or unwilling to talk to them in some capacity. Romans 10:14-17 talks about effectively sharing the Gospel by preaching. Preaching can take many different forms, but “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ”⁹ which can be done through many different means. This is the idea of people bearing witness to what they already know and sharing it with others to teach them about the Gospel of Christ. This leads right back to the call to teach, that is also an essential part of discipleship, which was discussed previously.

As mentioned before there are various means of discipleship, but all means still fall under the same best practices for effective discipleship. One of the most important practices is having a tight group of people you disciple so you can work effectively with each of them and devote enough time to supporting each of them.¹⁰ This is important, so one is able to really go deep in their discipleship with others and be fully invested in their lives. This is the same discipleship technique that Jesus Christ used with his closest twelve disciples. He concentrated the majority of his teachings on those core disciples that would continue to spread the Gospel even after his life was

⁹ Romans 10:17 (NIV)

¹⁰ Coleman, 24

done.¹¹ The goal of discipleship is not to lead everyone at once, but to spread the Gospel to a few people and then have each of them spread the Gospel to a few more people.

Another key practice for discipleship is having a life rooted in Christ. Often in discipleship one is walking alongside someone who has strayed from Christ, or who has just found Christ and needs to experience what it is like to have Christ be the center of your being. Discipleship is used to remind and show people of their identity in Christ¹² which leads people to understand how to live their lives in Christ. Having a life centered in Christ when discipling others is essential because that is one of the primary ways to disciple, through your actions. If your life is not centered in Christ, it is difficult to effectively disciple and share the Gospel in which Christ exemplifies how to live and how to teach others to live.

Community is another important practice in discipleship. Discipleship is not something that can be done alone, and without support from others. The community of disciples provides the foundation of the church¹³ which is gained from each member of the community having a firm foundation in Christ. When those who disciple have a firm foundation in Christ and they come together to form a community, the community has a firm foundation in Christ as well, which also aids effective discipleship.

This community of people who disciple then need to live out what they believe. Since discipleship means demonstrating and showing what the Gospel of Christ looks like, they need to be actively living out what the Gospel says. However, this does not mean to force or coerce people

¹¹ Coleman, 29

¹² Schoelles, 191

¹³ Schoelles, 194

into doing the same things you do, but to at least give them the opportunity to see you live out your life as Christ did.¹⁴ This often leads to those being disciplined to ask why one is doing certain things which is also an effective technique to disciple. This also gives way for intentional teaching and discipling without having to plan a lesson. It creates an environment where “classes [are] never dismissed”¹⁵ and the teaching is continuous. This is effective and a good practice of discipleship because it shows genuineness in one’s life being rooted in Christ and shows others that there a reason which leads you to live differently than others.

In order to do all of the above, there also needs to be an understanding of what the Gospel is teaching, so one is able to teach others. One needs to be “bearing the fruit, not only by behaviors but also attitudes and motives”¹⁶ to be effective at discipling. It is essential to know what fruit you are to bear to “adopt Jesus’ way of life.”¹⁷ You cannot effectively disciple others when you do not have a basis of how to live your life. It is impossible to teach others what guides your life in Christ and how you live your life in his way when you don’t have an understanding of how Christ lived his life.

Personally, I feel more of a call to discipleship than evangelism. Discipleship has more of a relational approach that I feel is important when teaching and showing others the Gospel. I feel that people are more receptive to the Gospel long-term when a relationship has been established. Having a community to work with is more enjoyable than working alone and speaking to people

¹⁴ Coleman, 64

¹⁵ Coleman, 69

¹⁶ Ezra, 125-26

¹⁷ Ezra, 125

with whom I have no relation. A community is “an atmosphere of deep relationships.... where friends connect.”¹⁸ I have learned through ministry contexts, such as being a camp counselor, that relationships are essential for teaching others and learning from others. It is possible to simultaneously disciple someone and also be the one they disciple. Discipleship can be a two-way street, where evangelism cannot be. I have had the joy of being able to disciple my coworkers and also feel them discipling me.

Discipleship is more intimate and connected with how Jesus spread the Gospel. Jesus essentially evangelized to many people but did so with forming relationship and meeting people where they were at. This is what I have often seen emulated in ministry settings I have been part of. In one sense I could be considered an evangelist in my job as a camp counselor because there are many children that come and have never heard the Gospel, and I am telling them about the Gospel. However, while I am telling them about the Gospel for the first time, I have already created this relationship with them; a relationship where they can trust me, and we know things about each other. This falls more into the definition of discipleship than evangelism, even though I am telling them about the Gospel for the first time.

I have also been on the receiving end of being discipled in my field experience last semester. While I am already a Christian, I can still have some evangelize to me, in a broad sense of the concept. New ideas and thoughts can be taught to me. I can be poured into and shown new things about the nature of Christ even when I am already a Christian. However, it was done in a relational way in my field experience. Even though the majority of my field experience at Center for

¹⁸ Crutweets

Champions was focused on ministering to others, and even teaching some individuals the Gospel for the first time, there was a relational approach to the evangelism and discipleship, one where it was important and expected of us to form a relational bond with the students prior to and while sharing the Gospel.

While I was ministering to others, I was also able to work alongside my supervisor and learn from her, and she was able to learn from me. We taught each other new ideas and shared new thoughts, but we had that relational aspect. I think aside from working with my supervisor, many people would consider me, in this job, to be an evangelist, however, because of the relational approach it becomes discipleship; walking alongside someone and showing them Christ's love and teachings through actions.

I think my call in discipleship is not necessarily to seek out people to teach, but to seek out people to build a relationship with, and as a result of that relationship, to teach them and share life with them. It might result in evangelizing as well, because I might find myself in relationship with someone who is not a Christian, but because of that relationship it ends up being discipleship paired with evangelism, which is more effective than evangelism on its own. Others would get to see my actions, the action of living my life like Christ, first through relationship, and then want to know why I act differently. This leads to being able to teach and explain rather than tell, because of that foundational relationship that we see emulated constantly in the life of Christ.

Therefore, I feel discipleship is more important than evangelism and this is the reason why I feel more of a call to discipleship. The relational aspects of discipleship lead to more effective sharing of the Gospel, and a more receptive nature to those listening. While both evangelism and

discipleship are important, discipleship is how I feel I am being called to spread the Gospel, through relationship and demonstrating my beliefs of the Gospel of Christ and his teachings through actions and relationships.



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