

What IS Discipleship, Really?

Dallas Willard famously said that every church that seeks to be faithful to its calling *must* ask two questions: **1) What is our plan for making disciples?** and **2) Is it working?**

Willard's questions have haunted the Western church for the past two decades since he proposed them. They've certainly haunted me.

But when I talk with pastors about these questions, I've noticed that the answers to the questions depend almost entirely on what we mean when we say "discipleship." So it's probably worth adding a third question: **"How would we *know* if our plan is working?"**

In other words: **What IS discipleship, really?**

Discipleship isn't programs

At a recent event, I talked with a lot of pastors about discipleship. I noticed that most of them talked about discipleship in terms of programs they had started at their churches. Here are some of the responses I got:

- "Our small groups are great! People love them."
- "We have a six-week on-ramping course for new believers that gets them up to speed on what a new believer needs to know."
- "We have a ton of book studies, Sunday school classes and teaching environments where people can learn more about the Bible."
- "We encourage everyone in our church to read through their Bible every year."
- "We have weekly discussions about the sermon in our small groups."
- "We have a mentoring program where we connect new believers or younger believers with older more 'seasoned' leaders."
- "We have an accountability structure with our men's group: we meet monthly to pray and weekly to confess our sins to one another."
- "We have an assimilation process that moves people from sitting in the seats each week to serving at our church."

All of these things are probably great programs. But none of them are necessarily descriptions of a plan for *discipleship*. Or rather, most of them *assume* a definition of discipleship that might not be all that helpful.

Discipleship starts and ends with people

True discipleship doesn't start with a system or a program, it starts with a *person*. It begins with us. We often want to transform our churches before we ourselves have been transformed, but it just doesn't work that way. We reproduce who we *are*, not what you know.

Programs may be necessary to connect people in discipling relationships, but it's important to locate the actual definition of discipleship in the *relationships* and not in the programs that facilitate the relationships.

3 key ingredients for discipleship

We like Willard's definition of a disciple: someone who is intentionally *with* Jesus to learn *from* Jesus how to be *like* Jesus in every aspect of his/her life.

But this never happens individualistically. It's always in the context of community, and so our plan for discipleship must involve 3 key ingredients.

1. A person who invests

Jesus chose twelve people and poured into them for three years. He walked with them, journeyed with them and really knew them. It was a long process of investment into relationship. Up close, not from a distance.

When we over-identify discipleship with "programs," it actually becomes a barrier to real relationships, because we think that "running the program" will do the job.

Great disciple-makers don't simply lead a program or facilitate a curriculum, they *participate* in our lives. They teach us to live as Jesus lived in the context of what's actually happening in our lives *right now*.

Discipleship requires that someone decides to invest their life into another.

2. A participant who follows

The other side of this coin is that discipleship requires that someone decides to receive the investment. Someone decides to follow, to learn, to grow. To look toward a living example (not a perfect example) of what it looks like to live out faithfulness to Jesus.

This discipling relationship should never become coercive or controlling, because Jesus taught us that we are "not to be like that" (Matt 20:26). Instead, it becomes a relationship of mutuality and vulnerability.

Because we participate in one another's lives, we see each other at our best and our worst. We become spiritual friends on a journey of discipleship together, but it starts when someone decides to follow.

3. A path that is discerned

The final ingredient needed is a path toward Christlikeness that is *discerned* (not pre-programmed ahead of time).

Rather than simply giving a list of goals to accomplish, hoping the result will be some kind of growth toward Christlikeness, good disciple-makers help their disciples *discern* what God is doing in their lives. Then they can lead them in repenting and believing in those areas.

It's not enough to just "read your Bible more, love your kids more, be a better spouse and try harder." Discipleship has to involve actively discerning where God is working right now, and where he is leading so we can align our lives with his rule and reign.

People and programs

"Go and make disciples" was Jesus' commission to his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel. This means we must have a relentless focus on *people* and whether or not they actually are becoming disciples (which also means learning to do everything he commanded!).

Yes, programs are necessary to organize our discipleship efforts, but I recognize that if I'm not careful about where I put my focus, my heart will often go the easy way of simply creating programs, because they seem more manageable. I build policies, parameters, and outcomes, and I'm done!

Actual people are messier. They disappoint you. You disappoint them. They can hurt you and walk away from you. And you'll hurt them. But discipleship demands that we work with actual people, investing in them along a pathway of discipleship that we discern together. Even if it feels risky. Even if we get hurt.

What about you?

- Where does your mind go when you hear Willard's questions about discipleship?
- Have you overemphasized the "programmatic" element of discipleship?
- What would it look like for you to begin this week investing in a *person*, participating in their life and discerning a path of discipleship with them?

