

C H A P T E R 1

Developing a Discipleship Strategy

We must decide where we want our ministry to count—in the momentary applause of popular recognition or in the reproduction of our lives in a few chosen people who will carry on our work after we have gone. *Really it is a question of which generation we are living for*” (emphasis added).²

This succinct statement in Robert Coleman’s *The Master Plan of Evangelism* clarifies the very heart of discipleship. What generation *are* we living for? Let’s look at some of the major texts that form the basis for Biblical discipleship.

MATTHEW 28:19, 20

Our responsibility to disciple people obviously begins with the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19

and 20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”

The imperative in these verses is the command to make disciples. This passage assumes not only that we will “go,” but it also commands us to disciple people. “Go ye” literally means “as you are going.” The assumption is that the followers of Christ are already “going.” The word “teach” means “to disciple,” or “to make a disciple.” Therefore, discipleship is the command of the Great Commission. Christ left His followers here to fulfill this mandate. He commanded

them—and us—to make disciples.

In *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, A. T.

Robertson stated, “This program [the Great Commission] includes making disciples . . . such as they were themselves.”³ The Great Commission is a

mandate of reproduction.

The very nature of discipleship is that the followers—disciples—of Christ were to carry on His work after He had gone (Matt. 10:25; Luke 6:40). Discipleship is the Biblical mandate to intentionally invest our lives in the lives of members of the next generation. Christ poured His life into a few disciples,

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telling them to “carry on His work” after He returned to Heaven. Christ started the work of making disciples and then commanded His followers to continue it. This method used by Christ is the essence of Coleman’s statement. Let me emphasize that the heart of discipleship is influencing the lives of people who will ultimately be able to impact the lives of the generation after them.

“Momentary applause” and “popular recognition” are possible achievements in youth ministry. All we have to do is design a program that attracts a large number of teenagers. Our

churches, the parents of teenagers, our peers, and maybe even the community will applaud. But have we accomplished anything that will last for eternity? Christ reached crowds, and we can do that as well; however, we must keep our ministries in balance. Christ’s ministry to a large number of people was never His top priority; the emphasis of His earthly ministry was training His disciples. He poured His life into them, expecting them to continue the discipling process.

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2 TIMOTHY 2:2

The apostle Paul wrote, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to

teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). We see a pattern in this verse. Paul disciplined Timothy, telling him to identify “faithful men” who would continue to “teach others

Discipleship was to continue from generation to generation.

also.” Notice the number of generations: Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and others. This model of discipleship was to continue from generation to generation.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5–7

Paul also mentioned this training strategy in 1 Thessalonians 1:5–7. He wrote: “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.” Review the phrases that identify a number of generations: “ye know what manner of men we were”—verse 5; “ye became followers of us”—verse 6; and “ye were ensamples to all that believe”—verse 7. Paul disciplined his followers and then told them to make disciples of their followers. The Biblical method of discipleship is to impact the next generation. Shouldn’t that be the focus of youth ministry?

Did you notice that the Thessalonian believers became followers of Paul? That raises a key question in

any study of Biblical discipleship, and that is, How can we ask anyone to be “followers” of us? The answer to this question is found in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:1, where Paul confidently asserted, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6 the word “followers” could be accurately translated “imitators,” or “mimics.”

The early believers did imitate, or follow, Paul, but only as he followed, or mimicked, the example of Christ. A. T. Robertson

made this point: “It is a daring thing to expect people to ‘imitate’ the preacher, but Paul adds ‘and of the Lord,’ for he only expected or desired ‘imitation’ as he himself imitated the Lord Jesus, as he expressly says in I Cor. 11:1. The peril of it all is that people so easily and so readily imitate the preacher when he does not imitate the Lord.”⁴

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Leaders must never forget that our model is the Lord Jesus Christ. Only as we follow Him can we say with confidence to someone else, “Follow me.”

Christ taught His disciples this principle in Matthew 10:25: “It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master.” Christ knew that one of the dangers associated with leadership is that the students might turn out like the teachers. This point is reemphasized in Luke 6:40: “The disciple is not above his master:

but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.” Luke’s point could be paraphrased this way: “Every student who is fully trained shall be like his teacher.” As the teacher imitates Christ and follows Him fully, and then as he spends a significant amount of time investing his life in the lives of his students, the stu-

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dents will become more and more like the teacher. The very heart of discipleship is that we reproduce ourselves in the lives of the next generation. We do that by purposefully imitating Jesus Christ and by training our disciples to do the same.

Allow me to list the basic principles of discipleship we have identified so far: (1) Leaders are to follow the mandate of the Great Commission: make disciples (Matt. 28:19, 20). (2) Leaders are to impact members of the next generation, who will then be able to impact future generations (2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Thess. 1:5–7).

THE NEXT-GENERATION PRINCIPLE

A point that I want to emphasize is called the “next-generation principle.” I believe with all my heart that the Bible puts a priority on reaching the next generation. Every church movement has a responsibility to reproduce itself in the lives of the next-generation. It’s Biblical! Look at Paul with Timothy, John Mark, and others. Paul made it a priority to in-

vest his life into people who would continue his ministry after he was gone. Look at the examples of Moses and Joshua (Num. 13:2; 27:16–23) and Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21). The Scriptures are filled with examples of men who made it a top priority to impact the next generation.

Take a few moments to study a negative example of this principle in Judges 2:7–10. The nation of Israel “served the LORD” throughout the days of Moses and his successor, Joshua. But the text points out that when Joshua’s generation died, “there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done.” Joshua failed to reproduce his life in those of

the next generation. This negative example in Scripture illustrates the next-generation principle. The entire nation of Israel struggled for years because of Joshua’s failure.

Perhaps our churches and ministries are struggling because we have failed to implement the next-generation principle. Youth ministry must be more than activities and programs. Our top priority must be to disciple our young people.

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