



The Duty of Discipleship:

Edifying the Church Inter-Generationally

Christian discipleship is deceptively simple. When spiritually mature people convey their piety to others discipleship is taking place. The good news is that discipleship doesn't require scientific studies, tactical gurus or expensive materials. But here's the bad news: If either ingredient is lacking — either spiritual maturity or the communication of spiritual disciplines — discipleship can't take place. In either case, God's plan for the extension of his kingdom is neglected and the church suffers.

Assessing the Situation

The evidence suggests that, increasingly, adults are unable to fulfill the first criterion for discipleship. They're getting older but they aren't maturing. A recent study by the Barna group indicates *"that personal spiritual development is a **secondary** consideration for millions of (American Christians)".* George Barna comments that *"Americans focus on what they consider to be most important; faith maturity is not it."*¹ The fact is: You can't give what you don't have.

In addition, those who are maturing are not always discipling the young. According to another study, while ninety percent of Americans believe it is their duty to teach religious values to their children, *"a majority of parents do not spend any time during a typical week discussing religious matters with them."*² *"The research discovered that tens of millions of parents are satisfied by simply enrolling their children in church programs"*³

The combination of immature adults and disconnected youth results in a "perfect storm" that wreaks havoc in the church in several ways.

First, a breakdown in discipleship perpetuates the increasing generation gap in the church which flies in the face of God's plan to build up his church inter-generationally.

Second, failure in discipleship wastes valuable Christian energy. The church is made up of millions of energetic, bright young people who, instead of being useful in God's kingdom will, without discipleship, struggle to learn on their own what should have been passed on to them. Attempting to learn by trial and error they will endure needless pain of failure. It should go without saying that mature adults should not sit back and watch their children make the same mistakes they did.

Finally, a disintegration of cross-generational discipleship affirms the anti-Christian message that the old are useless. According to the Bible nothing could be further from the truth.

One of the best places to see God's vision for true discipleship in the church is Titus 2 where God sets forth three important components.

Discipleship through Modeling

Mature saints are to be a pattern or example of good works. Paul wrote to Titus: *"In all things, (show) yourself to be a pattern of good works"* (2:7).

The Greek word that Paul uses for "pattern" is the basis for our English word "type." If you've seen the type hammer of a typewriter slam against the ribbon and paper, you understand Paul's concept. Each hammer holds an individual "type" that is able to make copies of itself. Paul is

saying to mature Christians, “*You are the type of good works; make a good impression on those around you.*” Since we’re always making copies of ourselves, the question is, “How can we do this to the glory of God?”

Be Transparent in Modeling

We will never fool our children into thinking that we are sinless. How then are we to be a good example? The answer is the gospel. We need to model to our young people our need for Jesus. Too often I give my children the impression that they are the sinners, not me. Sadly, such hypocrisy communicates to our children that they simply need to get more sophisticated in their sin and not get found out. If you are in Christ then you know you need Jesus just as much as your children do. Be transparent in this.

Be Explicit in Modeling

Mature believers should also avoid being overly discreet in their exercise of godliness. Sometimes it is necessary to *humbly* provide those you are mentoring with commentary on your good works. Think about those “Do-it-yourself” shows where the host models the skills of a carpenter or landscaper. He doesn’t just *show* what to do. He *tells* what he’s doing. In discipleship a good rule of thumb is “show *and* tell.” A father who is conscious of the duty of discipleship might explain to his son: “Daddy spoke in anger to Mommy tonight. I had to ask her to forgive me, and she did.”

Being explicit in our modeling also means explaining *why* we do what we do. The television carpenter doesn’t just expect that his audience will “pick up” the rationale behind what he is doing. Likewise, the Apostle Paul didn’t merely model bodily discipline before the Corinthians. He was explicit about his modeling: “*I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (1 Cor. 9:27). Teaching by example requires interpretation.

Discipleship through Teaching

Mature Christians are also to be teachers (Titus 2:3). Teachers have two essential attributes: The possession of personal experience and the ability to communicate experience. There is a huge difference between a “teller” and a “teacher.” To teach is to inform, that is, to “form in” another person real experience that is *known* in the deepest sense of the word.

This formational character of teaching is demonstrated in Titus 2 when Paul writes that the older women are to teach the younger. Older women are able to enter into the lives of younger women in a way that a pastor couldn’t possibly (or appropriately) do. From this we glean three important insights.

Teaching Is an Intimate Process

You cannot enter into and make an impact upon the experience of a young person by staying at arm’s length or interacting with them superficially. This is why it is so important to keep the communication lines open and to continually press them deeper.

Teaching Is a Varied Process

The wise mother knows she can’t teach a girl to be a woman simply by lecturing. She knows the importance of impacting her life in as many ways as possible. So she engages in dialogue, relates stories of similar experiences and explores possibilities. She asks questions, listens carefully and offers advice. She lovingly embraces, sheds a sympathetic tear, and tenderly administers discipline.

Teaching Is Connected to Life

When we think about teaching we may think “classroom.” While classrooms may play a role in teaching they tend to be artificial settings. By contrast the Bible would have us teach our mentees when life is happening (Deut. 6). This is why formal education can at best only be part of the discipleship process.

Since doctrine is life, religious teaching must be practical. We should cringe when we hear adults telling children, “You may not appreciate this now but you will some day.” If they can’t appreciate it now then it is probably not being taught well and perhaps the teacher doesn’t even believe it is important.

Jesus, the great teacher, entered into the lives of his students (in ways that we never will). In him wisdom took on flesh and blood and became practical. He was able to communicate real experience because he taught his disciples as life happened.

Discipleship through Training

The spiritually mature also need to *train* those with less experience (Titus 2:4; NIV). There are two prerequisites every true trainer possesses: Personal ability and the wherewithal to equip others for a task. Mentors not only communicate experience, they cultivate capacities. They not only *inform*; they also help the young to *perform*.

This implies working alongside of the one you are training. An on-the-job-training trainer doesn’t merely follow his trainees around telling them what to do. He works alongside of them. And, as in biblical discipleship, the trainer avoids two extremes. One is over-involvement; simply doing the work for the trainee. The other is under-involvement; just giving orders.

Mentors must give skill-appropriate responsibilities, allowing the mentees to do the things the mentors could do better. Mentors must be certain that their “help” is actually helpful (neither enabling nor abandoning). Mentors must be quick to encourage, and gentle in rebuke.

Our Lord Jesus was the best mentor this world has ever known. His goal, accomplished through his atoning sacrifice, was to make his disciples something like himself. As we thoughtfully direct our less experienced friends to Christ we have every reason to expect good things.

The call to discipleship is simply (though not easy). It is also serious. Remember this: Every young person you know is looking for a role model. What’s more, he or she *will* find one.

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¹ From “Americans Not Concerned About Their Spiritual Condition” accessed on November 12, 2008 from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=276>

² From “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness” Accessed on November 12, 2008 from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=138>

³ From “Spiritual Progress Hard to Find in 2003” accessed on November 12, 2008 from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=155>