

Discipleship

The Need for Qualitative Analysis

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Missionaries love numbers. As a means of stewardship and of evaluating the progress of the gospel in a specific place, missionaries count such things as number of gospel presentations, number of baptisms, and number of churches planted. In the same way, resources like Joshua Project present percentages of lostness in various locations and among different people groups. Such numerical analysis can be helpful in determining peoples with the least access to the gospel and locations where organizations should allocate more resources. When considering the task of discipleship, though, such numerical analysis may not give us an accurate picture of progress within the missionary task. In this article, I argue that we need more qualitative analysis to help us evaluate the task of disciple-making.

Making Disciples

Before we consider what that qualitative analysis might look like, though, we should consider the fundamental questions of what is a disciple and how do we make disciples? Simply put, a disciple is a follower of Christ.¹ Biblically, no distinction exists between believers and disciples. Those who believe in

¹ *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: IMB, 2018), 53.

Jesus follow him and seek to live in obedience to his commands. It follows, then, that disciple-making is the process of teaching people how to follow Christ in such a way that it leads to an increasing level of Christlikeness.

Foundations helps us here by describing the six transformations of a disciple: transformed heart, mind, affections, will, relationships, and purpose.² While the first of the six happens at conversion, the others “are found in increasing measure as a disciple grows through faith in Jesus as a member of His body, the church.”³ Thus, being a disciple is a process that begins at conversion and continues throughout the Christian life.

Of significance is the recognition that disciples are transformed in these ways not because of participation in specific programs but because of their devotion to the Master. Stephen Wright explains,

We cannot reduce [discipleship] to schemes, formulae, or a syllabus of instruction. It is vitally significant that discipleship rooted in the pattern of the gospel concerns real, complex, many-sided people learning what it means to be loyal to a real person: Jesus Christ, for it is logically impossible to be a “disciple” in general terms; you have to be a disciple of someone or something.⁴

Rightly understood, then, disciple-making should not have its aim simply in ensuring that believers have attended a certain set of courses or have learned certain material. Discipleship is not a box to be checked off on the way to completing the task. Rather, disciple-making is about equipping believers with the foundational knowledge and ability to “self-feed” for the remainder of their Christian life. That is, the fundamental question of disciple-making is: have believers been equipped to read Scripture, understand it, and apply it to their lives in such a way that leads to lifelong

² Ibid., 53–56.

³ Ibid., 53.

⁴ Stephen Wright, “Discipleship as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” in *World Mission*, ed. Scott Callahan and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 106.

transformation? Thus, we can see the critical nature of Scripture to the discipleship process. In its essence, disciple-making is about pointing people to God's Word so they can read and obey it.

In that sense, the task of disciple-making is intricately connected with the work of church planting. As *Foundations* explains, "God provides the local church as the necessary setting and primary relationships for the full measure of biblical discipleship."⁵ If the church is the primary context in which believers are discipled, then we need to ask if the churches we plant have members with the knowledge and skill to disciple others. Do the leaders in these churches have the ability to create sermons, Bible studies, and other discipleship-oriented content that will lead believers both to know God more completely and to obey him more fully? Of course, disciple-making is not just about learning to write sermons. Leaders must grow in holiness and model obedience for others, while learning to communicate and lead others into greater obedience. All believers, and especially leaders, must *be* disciples while also seeking to *make* disciples.

The Problem with Metrics

In that sense, then, statistical analysis does not always give us an accurate picture of progress as it relates to discipleship. In his book *Tyranny of Metrics*, Muller makes this point when he writes that "what can be measured is not always worth measuring."⁶ Moreover, "what gets measured may have no relationship to what we really want to know."⁷ For example, numbers of attendees at discipleship or training events do not tell us what was taught, how it was taught, or whether the attendees actually learned anything.

⁵ *Foundations*, 57.

⁶ Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), Introduction, Sec. 1, para. 6, Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/840027/the-tyranny-of-metrics-pdf>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

We might also compare two different discipleship-oriented events. The first is a two-hour seminar that requires no preparation in which participants simply listen to a talk on some important subject. More attend because less is required of them. The second event is more interactive where students must read on some subject beforehand, share their insights on the topic, develop a plan for how to disciple others to live out the truths studied, and report back in three months about their efforts in discipleship. Fewer people attend the second event because more is required of them. Simply measuring number of participants will lead us to value the first type of training over the second and will not enable us to evaluate whether participants have internalized the content or have been equipped to do something. In other words, we don't gain an accurate picture of whether they have actually been disciplined.

Stating that they haven't actually been disciplined does not diminish the importance of the first type of discipleship event. Such events are important and can stimulate greater love for Christ and more fervent obedience to his commands. The point is that when we focus solely on metrics, we end up measuring—or even *valuing*—the wrong thing. Another way to look at this issue is to consider processes of deeper discipleship and training leaders for different types of church ministry. Lay leaders and almost any believer can participate in entry level, informal theological training. Thus, the numbers of those disciplined in such programs is higher. More formal degree programs have stricter entrance requirements and take longer to complete; thus, fewer will participate. If all we look at is numbers, the first is more valuable since we can provide deeper discipleship to more in a shorter time. But as I will show below, the second is perhaps more valuable in the long run because it provides deeper understanding, reflection, and meditation on the topic, thus enabling both obedience and ability to teach others why and how to obey.

In that sense we might consider Diagram 1 and see that the highest percentage of believers would benefit from the more basic types of discipleship. The further we move up the discipleship pyramid, the fewer the number of

believers who would benefit from such programs. Some might ask why we should invest the time and resources to develop more rigorous discipleship programs when only a few will benefit from them.



Figure 1: Diagram 1: Discipleship Pyramid

Only looking at these criteria, though, fails to recognize the strategic value of the more in-depth programs. Because the more advanced programs require participants to read, engage with, analyze, think critically about, write, and present, those who finish the program are equipped to *do* more for the kingdom. Someone who completes a basic discipleship course should be able to share some of the content learned with others, but someone who completes a more advanced degree will have the ability to *produce his or her own* discipleship and training materials. Even if only a few are equipped at that level, this advanced training is still of strategic value since the few can influence so many more for a longer time. In that sense, we can consider Diagram 2.

Thus, when it comes to the task of disciple-making, focusing on metrics alone can give us a skewed perspective of what we are accomplishing. We need qualitative analysis to accurately assess whether the programs we



Figure 2: Diagram 2: Pyramid of Influence

implement are meeting the desired objectives and producing the kinds of disciples the church needs.

Objectives for Disciple-Making

Discipleship and disciple-making are somewhat unique within missionary contexts because we recognize that the missionary will not be in this context forever. Thus, the missionary must make disciples with an equipping model—planting a church in such a way that these new believers are equipped with the knowledge and ability to continue their pursuit of Christ long after the missionary is gone. In the hopes of providing some sort of objectives for disciple-making efforts within missionary contexts, let me provide five questions for evaluating our disciple-making efforts.

Are our disciple-making efforts helping believers to love God more deeply? This objective should be obvious, but if we merely track metrics, we will have no means of evaluating whether believers in this context are growing in holiness and in love for God. But in the NT, we see Paul stating his goal as “that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28) or praying for believer that they may gain wisdom “in the knowledge of him” (Eph. 1:17). Paul desires these believers to grow in their knowledge of God that they might trust him and experience more of him in their lives.

While some have a tendency to dichotomize knowledge and obedience in discipleship, we see these two concepts in unity in Scripture. In the Great Commission, Jesus describes the process of disciple-making with the phrase “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). In order to obey, disciples must be taught something. It’s only in their growing knowledge of God that they can obey. In the epistles we see the same dynamic where the authors first teach them something they need to know about the gospel before transitioning to the practical imperatives in the later half. For example, in Ephesians Paul spends chapters 1–3 helping believers understand their position “in Christ,” then pivots in 4:1 and spends

4–6 commanding them to live out those truths in specific ways. Therefore, Paul could say to the Ephesian elders that he declared to them “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:28).

Are our disciple-making efforts equipping people to interpret Scripture faithfully? Healthy churches have leaders who know how to interpret the Word, but all believers should have the ability not only to interpret and apply Scripture but also to evaluate theological ideas through the lens of Scripture (Acts 17:11). Discipleship programs and materials often convey information to help believers grow in their relationship with Christ, but they can convey that information without leading believers to correctly read and interpret Scripture; thus, they may not know why they should act a certain way and are not equipped to face a new choice or temptation. In contrast, though, Paul writes that faithful believers are those who know how to rightly divide the Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Discipling believers to interpret Scripture doesn't necessarily mean we teach a course on hermeneutics (though that may be helpful at times), but it does mean we evaluate our discipleship methods to ask the question: Is this process modeling the correct way to read and interpret Scripture? Scripture is the fountain of theology. Ability to interpret is essential to developing good theology and planting healthy churches that think biblically about key doctrinal ideas. Moreover, it means that believers can apply the truths of Scripture to any issue they face, including issues that arise in their context long after the missionary has left.

Are our disciple-making efforts equipping people to view their world from a biblical perspective? Similar to the previous point, one objective in disciple-making is helping believers to know Christ and the biblical story in such a way that they see the world the way God does. In Galatians 5 Paul explains this idea with the phrase “walk by the Spirit” (5:15), fleshes that out with the “fruit of the Spirit” (5:22–23), and then summarizes the whole discussion with the command, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep step with the Spirit” (5:25). Keeping step with the Spirit points to the idea of believers abiding

in Christ (John 15:1-8), following him day by day, and living out his truth in their daily lives. Doing so requires knowing him and his gospel in a deep, personal way.

The book of 1 Peter provides a good example of the need to disciple believers to think biblically. Peter's original recipients were facing persecution and wondering why they were. Peter encouraged them and helped them understand suffering, explaining that they should not be surprised at the challenges they faced (1 Pet. 4:12). Not only should these believers navigate persecution by looking back on what God has accomplished in Christ (1 Pet. 1:3), but with forward-looking faith, they should also anticipate and look forward to future glory in Christ (1:3-5, 13; 2:7; 4:13; 5:4). Thus, Christians should consider themselves "sojourners" (1:1, 17; 2:11) who live honorably before unbelievers, and Peter helps them to know how to do so. Following Peter's example, we need to train new believers in missionary contexts to be disciplined to think biblically about their situation and calling.

Are our disciple-making efforts equipping people to self-theologize? As missionaries share the gospel, begin to disciple and then gather believers into churches, one goal should be to equip these believers to self-theologize. One characteristic of a healthy, indigenous church is that it can do theology on its own. Thus, as new believers become better interpreters of Scripture and think biblically about their situation and context, these maturing disciples should be able to articulate what God's truth means in their cultural context. Missionaries should consider whether their discipling efforts are simply leading believers to memorize, copy, or utilize the missionary's own theological ideas, or are they equipping the church to do theology on its own.

Are our disciple-making efforts equipping people to join God in his mission? I left this objective last on purpose since missionaries tend to gravitate to this purpose first. Discipling new believers must certainly result in both a greater understanding of the gospel and a greater burden to share it. But even as missionaries evaluate whether local believers are growing in their desire and ability to share the gospel, they need to recognize these believers

as partners and co-laborers. This means that missionaries need to listen to national believers and not just dictate that they join the mission on our terms. The desire and passion of new believers to join us in spreading the gospel should naturally flow out of God's Word and an understanding of God as the author of mission—not just because we tell them they need to do God's mission.

Conclusion

In January 1956, Jim Elliot and four others were speared to death in Ecuador as they were attempting to share the gospel with the Huaorani, an unreached people with no known contact with the outside world. In the years since, many have pondered whether the mission was a “success” or if the sacrifice of these five was worth it. If the simple obedience of these five is not enough to consider the mission a success, then one must consider measurable outcomes (e.g., how many were motivated to become missionaries or how many people were reached as a result of hearing this story) and contrast that with the cost of these five lives. For her part, Jim's widow Elisabeth Elliot was annoyed with such speculation. Ellen Vaughn explains Elliot's perspective:

Metrics are great, and a useful means of assessing stewardship of resources, but measuring eternal destinies by temporal formulas is a risky business. We just don't have enough transcendent dimensions in our brains to comprehend the mysterious, sovereign, quantum workings of God that emanate from eternity past for the purposes of His glory for eternity future. To opine about what God is up to in terms of results can stray into the realm of hubris, or faithlessness. If we must see that there are worthy results in order to come to peace about what God has done or allowed, then we have no faith.⁸

⁸ Ellen Vaughn, *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2020), 259–260.

Disciple-making is a difficult task. An equipping model that provides believers with the knowledge and ability to pursue Christ for the rest of their lives enables the missionary to walk away as Paul did: entrusting them to God and to the Word of His grace (Acts 20:32).

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