

# Jesus Demonstrated an Intentional, Relational Model of Disciple-making: Why Haven't We Followed It?<sup>1</sup>

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UDK: 27-318:277

Category: Conference paper

<https://doi.org/10.32862/k.19.1.4>

## Abstract

*By reading the Gospels, we can see that Jesus demonstrated an intentional, relational model of disciple-making. In his desire to reach the crowd, Jesus focused on a small group of people with the goal of making disciples who would make more disciples—for at least two valid reasons: internalization and multiplication. Within the context of close-knit relationships, Jesus sought to, in a way, multiply himself through the Twelve. But the question is why the church, to a great extent, did not follow that discipleship model. The article suggests two possible reasons: the first reason is this: We have been preaching a non-discipleship, forgiveness-only gospel. The second reason we have failed to follow the biblical model we observe in the Gospels is that we tend to substitute programs for Jesus' intentional, relational approach. By contrasting program with relationship, the article offers two provocative conclusions: 1. If we could have made disciples by preaching to people, the job would have been done long ago. 2. Even the greatest preacher who ever lived—Jesus himself—did not rely on his preaching to make disciples. He relied on his personal association.*

**Keywords:** *discipleship, relations, internalization, multiplication*

1 This article was written as part of the Zagreb Biblical Institute research project: "The Concept of Discipleship Among Evangelical Churches in Croatia."

## Introduction

As part of the conference on discipleship, I am exploring two questions: 1. Who or what is a disciple according to Jesus? 2. Jesus Demonstrated an Intentional, Relational Model of Disciple-making: Why Haven't We Followed It? Why have these questions been so important to me? I suppose our deepest convictions and pursuits come out of our personal experiences. This was true for me. Let me introduce this session with a brief sketch of my spiritual journey that serves as the background motivation for these talks.

I am a native Californian, born on the West Coast of the US. By age, I am a cutting-edge baby boomer born right after World War II. Why is that important? Following WWII, there was a religious boom in the US. Church buildings could not go up fast enough? But by and large families outsourced Christian formation to the church. It was not practiced in the home. This was the home I was brought up in. Yes, we said prayers of thanksgiving at family meals. But in retrospect, I could not rely on my parents either to lead me to Jesus or to nurture my faith. In my parents' minds, that was the church's job. Like many families in that era, parents outsourced the formation of religious faith to the church.

The Lord interceded through the church to bring me to my initial faith in Christ. At a troubled time as a 12-year-old, I was invited to a weekend church. My problem was fear and anxiety. I was very young for my grade level and, therefore, behind in my emotional development. I feared failure in school, felt alone in relationships, and was challenged in athletics. There were times when I would even break down crying at school. How embarrassing! At this weekend's church camp, I heard the good news of Jesus' gospel. Jesus loved me and wanted a relationship with me. The speaker of the weekend offered an invitation through the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). I responded to the invitation to yield my life to Christ and ask him to take up residence in me. And wow, did he come in. I had an overwhelming experience of the love of God. I told my camp counselor I had decided to ask Christ into my life, or whatever the proper language was. I had not yet learned how to speak Christainese. All the instruction I recall receiving that weekend was, "If you have become a Christian, you should read your Bible." Had I ever read my Bible on my own? Had my family ever had some form of home devotional Bible reading? No. I did not have a clue what to do. And apparently, "my church" did not either. I heard from no one. I did not know whether I was supposed to ask what was next.

Therefore, I drifted back to my peripheral connection to the church until the summer before my last year in high school. That summer, I followed my sister's example and went on the Glendale Educational Tour. This was a six-week tour of the historical high spots of the US with 70 other high school students in two busloads. As the Lord would have it, a subgroup of 4-5 fellow students met regularly

for Bible study. They were from the same church that I sporadically attended. They invited me to join them. I remember consciously thinking, “They must have had a similar experience of encounter with Christ, but they knew what to do with it.” After that summer tour, I was invited into the high school church youth group. It was a community of love and joy that would leave a lasting, transformative impact on my life.

I started to grow in this flourishing environment. This painfully shy kid started coming out of his shell. So rapid was my growth that I started assuming leadership roles in the church. Then, as I was going into my second year of college, I would receive a phone call that would change the entire course of my life. Don was on the other end of the connection. Don was a seminary student who had started an outreach ministry to young adolescents. He had 130 students showing up at the church facility every Wednesday night. He needed help. He asked me if I would join fellow college students to minister to these kids. It was a raucous group. Every Wednesday, I would get a group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys. Here is the irony. What I didn’t get in 7<sup>th</sup> grade when I came to Christ, now I could provide, at least in some form, to these 7<sup>th</sup> graders. The Lord had closed the loop. Don constantly challenged us to get involved in these students’ lives beyond Wednesday nights. I would pick them up in my red VW Bug after school, play basketball, get some ice cream, or even visit them in their homes.

But I also received a bonus. Periodically, Don would call up and ask to get together one-on-one. Often, we met at the tennis court. After playing tennis, we would sit on the bench next to the court, and Don would pull out his New Testament. He would share with me some Scriptures that impacted his life. He did not just read me a passage and leave it at that; he would take me into his heart and thoughts to show me how the truth informed and even exposed his weak spots. As we sat next to each other on that bench, there was a transaction that took place. I liked what I saw in this man. “If Don wants to follow Jesus, then so do I.” So, my first model of how disciples were made came from Don. To influence people, you need to get close to them and stay with them over time. I had picked up along the way the model that Jesus gave us. Jesus selected a few to be with him and, through intimate personal association, prepared them to take over his ministry when he returned to his Father. My early impression was that discipling was walking with an individual in a one-to-one relationship, assisting them in growing toward maturity in Christ with the hope that they would do the same for others.

But in the mid-1980s, I had what I call two epiphanies that radically changed my paradigm of an effective way to make disciples that reflected Jesus’ intentional, relational approach. After practicing the one-on-one approach for several years, I was pretty frustrated with my inability to help anyone else adopt a disciple-making lifestyle of personal investment in others. I suppose that this underlying frustration was gnawing away at me. Then, I had my first epiphany. Late one afternoon, I

was jogging around a high school track, as was my custom. It helped me clear my head at the end of the day. I was not consciously thinking about how to solve this problem when, out of the sky, it seemed pretty literally, I had what I have called an arrow go through my body. One moment, disciple-making was the farthest from my consciousness; the next moment, in my mind's eye, appeared the format of a disciple-making tool. I saw the first sections that would make up each chapter, which you can find in my book *Discipleship Essentials* today. The initial page is a Core truth, the theme, or the Big Idea in a catechism, question-answer format. The second page is a Scripture memory verse or verses articulating biblical core truth. The third page is an Inductive Bible Study that focuses on another scripture that elucidates the core truth. Then, finally, the fourth section is a Reading, which is a contemporary discussion of the eternal truth being considered. I remember going home that day, bursting with energy and a sense of call to write a disciple-making tool. We had a vacation near the horizon, so I asked my wife's permission to get started on this project. We had a young daughter then, so my request was to block out the morning, and they would have me the rest of the day. This fledgling start later became *Discipleship Essentials*, which was initially published at the end of 1998. To this day, it is still a best seller for InterVarsity Press.

The second epiphany occurred within the following year. I was completing my Doctor of Ministry at Fuller Seminary and needed a final project to cap it off. By this point, I had written a beginning version of what I just described. My faculty adviser suggested I turn this into a project by using it in different settings and then comparing the results and dynamics with each. We decided to do what I had done in a one-on-one discipling relationship, a small group of ten, and quite casually, she suggested a group of three. A young man, two years out of college, had approached me with a request for me to mentor him. I had no idea what that meant, but I said, how about if you are one of my guinea pigs for this group of three. We will find a third and dig into this material I have written. The three of us met over lunch at a restaurant that was equidistant from all of our workplaces. We laid our notebooks out on the table and started sharing our lives and insights into God's word and applying the truth personally to right where we lived. I was stunned. The increase in energy level was the first thing I noticed. The interaction was dynamic. I also noticed that I was a member of the group, not the center of the group. We were on a journey together. I quickly discovered that this was a far more effective way to deepen our maturity in Christ, provide loving accountability for life change, and challenge each other as needed to make the changes that the Holy Spirit was identifying. From that moment, I have not looked back. We now call these little groups of three or four "MicroGroups" in contrast to the more traditional small group size of 6-12.

To bring these two epiphanies together, I would say that when you put the content of a biblically based curriculum, such as *Discipleship Essentials*, in the context or container of a highly relational environment of a MicroGroup, you are in the

“Hot House of the Holy Spirit.” You will hear me use the term MicroGroup a lot. By that, I mean a group of three or four people, including the one who initiates by calling people personally and individually to join together on a journey toward maturity in Christ; a significant part of the commitment is to begin one’s group in a replicative process.

## 1. Intentional, Relational Model of Disciple-making

With that as the back story to my motivation, let’s jump into our second theme: “Jesus Demonstrated an Intentional, Relational Model of Disciple-making: Why Haven’t We Followed It?” or “How can Jesus’ model of disciple-making inform us about how to make disciples who make disciples?” Fortunately, we have the model right before our eyes in the Gospels for how to make reproducing disciples.

When I was a student in seminary studying to become a pastor, I went to a workshop at a local church taught by a pastor with a reputation for training disciple-makers. One of the things he said that stuck with me was that the Bible was not only a *message book* (the content of the gospel) but also a *method book*. It shows us how, primarily through the model of Jesus, we can disciple others to maturity and reproduction. In Luke 6:12-13, we come to a critical turning point in our Lord’s ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus spent all night in prayer. It is as if Luke is shining blinking lights, saying, “Pay attention, this is important.” What is so momentous? Jesus is going to select those who would be a part of his inner circle: “In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when the day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (Lk 6:12-13).

It is estimated that at the moment of Jesus’ all-night prayer, he is about six months into his public ministry. Jesus has a more extensive group following him than just the Twelve. We know from earlier incidents recorded in Luke that Peter, James, and John had joined Jesus after Peter’s great catch of fish (Lk 5:1-11); Levi (Matthew), the tax collector, was also among the followers by now (Lk 5:27-28). Jesus’ all-night prayer, before selecting the Twelve, is an instructive model. Frankly, this is one of those moments when I would have loved to hide behind a rock, overhearing what was on Jesus’ heart as he conversed with his Father. So, let us do a little speculating. What might we have heard if we had been there listening in on Jesus’ conversation with the Father on the eve of Jesus’ calling of the Twelve?

Was Jesus still finalizing his list of 12 before the Father? Perhaps Jesus had a list of 15 and needed to eliminate three to get down to 12. Was he contemplating the personalities that he would have to spend intimate time with on their itinerant journeys? Matthew, the tax collector (Roman collaborator), and Simon the Zealot (insurrectionist against Rome) were ripe for conflict. Peter could be a little annoying. Every thought that passed through Peter’s mind seemed to come out of

his mouth. Did he question the wisdom of including Judas Iscariot, knowing he would have a traitor in his midst?

I have to believe that when Jesus came to this moment, he had a settled conviction about who the Twelve were to be. When he called them, he could do so with the sense that they were appointed. I suspect that on that night, Jesus was praying for them by name. Jesus realized there was a lot of work ahead to mold these raw recruits if he was going to get them ready to be the vanguard of a world mission. John 1 appears to be a window into the earliest meeting with Jesus at the seeker stage before Jesus issued the call, “Follow me.” Andrew, Peter’s brother, brings Peter to Jesus, saying, “We have found the Messiah.” From the moment Jesus saw Peter, he understood what he would become. Jesus said to Peter, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)” (Jn 1:41-42). We know that Cephas (Aramaic) and Petros (Greek) both mean “rock.” Jesus visualized in prayer what Peter would become, but he certainly was not a “rock” at that moment, nor in many other moments, unless you see a rock as being dense. He certainly was that.

But the more important question is, why did Jesus focus on a few? Of the many valid reasons for Jesus’ investment in a few, two seem most directly related to Jesus’ goal of making self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers:

1. Internationalization
2. Multiplication

### *1.1. Internalization*

Jesus invested in a few because it was the only way to transfer his message, manner, and mission into the lives of his core followers. We might immediately object. If Jesus was trying to reach as many people as possible, why not allow the crowds and his popularity to grow so that his increasing number of followers became a mass movement? If you were to read the text immediately after the Twelve were named, you would see that the people were clamoring after Jesus. Luke tells us that a “great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people...came to hear him and be healed of their diseases” (Lk 6:17). He had them in the palm of his hand. He was riding high.

Yet we see that Jesus had a healthy skepticism of the masses. Jesus was aware that people were drawn to the shiny object of his presence, which was spotlighted by miracles. The apostle John gives us insight into Jesus’ understanding of human nature: “Now while Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. [But note Jesus’ caution] But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person” (Jn 2:23-25).

Jesus knew those who flocked to be near him were vacillating, fickle. As soon as he articulated the demands of discipleship, his fan club would dwindle. What would have been the outcome if Jesus staked the future of his ministry on the loyalty of the crowds? Jesus' popularity seemed to have reached a crescendo on Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem amidst the adoration of those awaiting a military Messiah with shouts of "Hosanna, Glory to God in the highest!" But as soon as the hopes that Jesus was a conqueror were dashed, perhaps the same people five days later were howling, "Crucify him, Crucify him."

Jesus knew that it required nothing to be a fan or admirer. You had to get out of the crowd or out of the pew to be in a relationship in order to be formed into a follower. Discipleship is fundamentally a relational process over time. You can't make disciples by just speaking to people in crowds. "Disciples cannot be mass produced. We cannot drop people into a program and see disciples emerge at the end of a production line. It takes time to make disciples. It takes individual personal attention" (Eims 1978, 45).

Close personal association with his disciples in real-life situations provided opportunities for Jesus to speak into their lives. James and John approached Jesus secretly to secure a position on his right and left hand when Jesus sat on the throne of his kingdom. This allowed Jesus to turn their understanding of true greatness and power on its head. Of course, the sons of Zebedee's attempt to do an end run around the other 10 disciples did not sit well with them. "And when they then heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John" (Mk 10:41). Jesus told them that they were acting just like pagans "who lord it over others." This was not to be their way. The genuinely great would-be servants of all. They would follow Jesus' example, "who came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:35-45). A. B. Bruce (s. a. 14) sums up Jesus' means of internalizing his life in his followers: "This careful, painstaking education of the disciples secured the teacher's influence on this world should be permanent; that His kingdom should be founded on the rock of deep and indestructible convictions in the minds of a few, not on the shifting sands of superficial impressions in the minds of the many." The legacy that Jesus wanted to leave behind was the transformed lives of ordinary men who could carry on his work after he returned to the Father. Internalization occurred through intense association. There was a second primary reason Jesus focused on a few: the multiplication of his disciples.

### *1.2. Multiplication*

We might ask, then, with Jesus' focus on a few, was Jesus unconcerned about the multitudes? In one study on the gospel of Mark, the authors found that Jesus spent 49% of his time with the Twelve, and even a more significant percentage of that time as he set his face to go to Jerusalem and the cross. Was this evidence that



the masses were receding from Jesus' vision? Absolutely not! Jesus did not think like we do. We believe we need to organize events that draw crowds to reach the multitudes. We equate vision with the size of our audience. Jesus had a vision of a different sort. He had enough vision to think small. Was he just focused on this inner circle? No, Jesus' heart broke for the multitudes. He saw them as lost sheep wandering in the wilderness, sheep without a shepherd. He prayed to the Lord of the harvest that he would raise up workers to bring in the harvest. In this context, Jesus sent out the 12 into the harvest.

Eugene Peterson (1982, 182) humorously captured Jesus' vision, "Jesus, it must be remembered, restricted 9/10 of His ministry to 12 Jews because it was the only way to reach all Croatsians [fill in your own national origin]." Now, that is a real vision. In other words, we are followers of Jesus today, because Jesus staked his ministry on a few, not on the whims of the crowds. George Martin (Watson 1982, 53), an Episcopal Rector, translated Jesus' strategy into a way that pastors might apply it to ministry today:

Perhaps today's pastor should imagine that they are going to have three more years in their parish as pastor, and that there will be no replacement for them when they leave. If they acted as if this were going to happen, they would then put the highest priority on selecting, motivating, and training lay leaders that could carry on the mission. The results of three sustained years of such an approach would be quite significant. Even revolutionary.

Of course, this is the way Jesus thought about his mission. Jesus lived with the urgency of a three-year timeline. With the cross before him, he knew he had to prepare the Twelve to carry on his mission. Each day meant he was closer to the reason he came to earth and, therefore, closer to the time his ministry would become theirs. Jesus' strategy was to expand the leadership base so that instead of one, there would be Twelve (OK, even Jesus lost one).

Jesus was now extending himself through the lives of the Twelve, who were being prepared in Jesus' presence to carry on in his absence. Here is the relevance for us: The reach of our ministry is in direct proportion to the growth of our leadership base. His strategy was designed to touch the whole world by multiplying carefully trained disciples. A leader is not evaluated by what they can do themselves. Their value now depends mainly on what they can get done through others. Robert Coleman (1964, 21) sums up Jesus' approach with a turn of a phrase, "Jesus' concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men, the multitudes would follow." If you want to go wide, then you first must go deep. So, why did Jesus focus on a few?

- *Internationalization*: He needed to get himself into their life. You do not do this at a distance. As much as we are thankful that we have Jesus' teaching, he



did not rely on his teaching of the crowds to make disciples. He prioritized his inner core.

- *Multiplication*: The second major reason Jesus focused on a few was to multiply himself through the Twelve. He was growing leaders. There is an unbreakable principle: our ministry can only have an impact to the extent that we increase our leadership base. In other words, we must make disciples who make disciples. We must produce self-initiating, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who will lead others to become the same.

In my book *Transforming Discipleship*, you will find a chapter on what I call “Jesus’ Preparatory Empowerment Model” of disciple-making. Time does not permit me to describe four recognizable phases or stages through which the disciples are moved to prepare them to take over Jesus’ ministry after he returned to the Father and from which the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to be Jesus’ substitute presence and empower his followers.

## **2. Why do we not Follow Jesus’ Model of Disciple-making?**

But I want to explore an important question: If Jesus’ disciple-making model is so clear, why haven’t we followed it? Let me illustrate: Suppose I asked 100 pastors what mission Jesus gave his church. At least 90 pastors might reference the Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” If I were to ask these same pastors, can you name Jesus’ Twelve original disciples? Again, I would suppose we might be able to get ten out of the Twelve: Judas, son of James, and James, the Son of Alphaeus, might escape us. But if I ask these same pastors, can you name your disciples? We might have many of these pastors staring at their shoes.

Why have we missed Jesus’ model of relational, intentional disciple-making? What has caused us not to see and practice what is right before our eyes in the Gospels? The first reason is this: We have been preaching a non-discipleship, forgiveness-only gospel. Do you recall the woman who said, “Why do I have to be a disciple?” She had heard a non-discipleship, forgiveness-only salvation message that called her to relinquish her life. She did not understand Paul’s powerful statement, “Your life is not your own; you have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20).

The second reason we have failed to follow the biblical model we observe in the Gospels is that we tend to substitute programs for Jesus’ intentional, relational approach. Let us define our terms: What do we mean by program? Programs are structured group methods we use to herd groups of people through systems. If I were to ask the same 100 pastors mentioned above, how do you make disciples at your church, the most likely response would be for them to list their church pro-

grams, starting with what you do in worship: 1. Weekly, we preach through the Bible; 2. We offer a variety of Bible studies for men and women; 3. Small groups meet in homes to deepen a sense of community; 4. We have outreach programs like Alpha to introduce people to the gospel; 5. There are opportunities for service, etc.

Programs begin with a broadcast message to the whole church inviting them to join our 10-week discipleship program. There is no personal warmth, no eye contact, and no sense of being singled out. Your individuality is not considered. The individual in a program must adjust to the system. You are not known for your unique personal journey of faith, challenges or hurdles to faith development, current life circumstances, etc.

Whereas Jesus' relational approach is rooted in the power of personal invitation. This is the critical difference between Jesus' method and the impersonal programmatic offerings in most churches. Our biblical reference point for Jesus' model is rooted in Luke 6:12-13. We noted that Jesus spent all night in prayer to the Father, and then the next day, he chose the Twelve from the larger group of disciples to be in his inner circle of apostles. The first step of disciple-making is prayer. Jesus did not call his disciples to join him on day 1. he prayed until he was settled on the Twelve who would be with him. As Jesus modeled, we need to pray until we have a settled conviction as to whom the Lord has put on our hearts to invite to join us on this disciple-making journey. This should not be rushed. Sometimes, it can take weeks or even months for you to feel comfortable that you have an assured conviction.

Once Jesus had inner confirmation, he brought the larger group of followers together, and then by name, he called them to himself. In following Jesus' model, we approach individuals, looking them in the eye and asking them to join us in a disciple-making journey. The invitation could sound something like:

I have been praying about something I would like you to consider. I am putting together a new group whose purpose is to help each of us become better followers of Jesus. I would like to invite you to meet with me and at least one other person (preferably two) so that we can become all that our Lord intends us to be. My role is to be on this journey with you. I need a group like this for myself. As I was praying about these new relationships, the Lord kept putting you on my heart. Would you be willing to prayerfully consider joining with me and one or two others as we grow together to become better followers of Jesus?

Jesus offered a personal, individual touch; programs are designed to push people through a process. Let's now drill down more specifically and contrast the program with the relationship.

*(1) Discipling relationships are marked by intimacy, whereas programs tend to be focused on information*

Programs focus on information transfer. This assumes that more information on the Bible and doctrine will lead directly to transformation into Christlikeness. I served a church where the practice was to hire theologically trained pastors and have them teach correct doctrine in a classroom setting. The whole approach was to get people to ascend to core beliefs, such as justification by faith alone. If people indicated an understanding that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we thought our job was done. In other words, intellectual assent to essential doctrine was the goal.

John Ortberg has mused over the fact that two people with the same doctrinal beliefs can have widely divergent characters. One person can be loving, kind, gentle, and gracious, whereas another can be judgmental, rigid, brittle, and prickly. They both say they believe the same things. What is the difference? One has absorbed biblical truth that has impacted their character in a Christlike fashion; the other has compartmentalized truth that has not impacted their character.

In contrast, the relational approach creates what Alicia Britt Chole (2007, 63-64) calls this “purposeful proximity.” She says, “How easy it is to substitute informing people for investing in people, to confuse organizing people with discipling people. Life is not the offspring of a program or paper. Life is the offspring of life.” Scripture comes alive in us when we are relationally open with others, allowing the Truth to penetrate the inner recesses of our being. As a college student, a seminarian impacted me because I saw a man wrestle with the Word in a way that addressed the specifics of his life. Head knowledge without heart knowledge is useless information.

*(2) Discipling relationships involve full, mutual participation, whereas programs are one or a few who prepare content for the many*

Programs generally tend to rely on the expert to deliver the content. The classic context is preaching at our weekend services. A pastor has been alone for 15-20 hours a week putting together a 30-minute predigested teaching. The congregation sits silently, picking and choosing what is allowed into their minds and hearts. This is a passive experience. What is required of someone to sit in a worship center to listen to a message? Very little. No advanced preparation. No personal investment. Usually, there is not even a quiet moment at the end of the service to ask the Lord to speak a truth that we need to take with us. By the time you hit the patio to have a conversation or to leave for home, over 90% has been lost. Here are my two provocative conclusions:

1. If we could have made disciples by preaching to people, the job would have been done long ago.
2. Even the greatest preacher who ever lived—Jesus himself—did not rely on his preaching to make disciples. He relied on his personal association.

By contrast, in a relational setting, all the participants come together having prepared their insights in a scripturally based curriculum to share. Each is responsible for their preparation, self-disclosure, and life-change accountability. There is no one teacher. The biblically-based curriculum and the Holy Spirit are the teachers. The learner and teacher can vary momentarily in the give and take of three or four people sharing their insights and applying the Scriptures to their lives. At one moment, you might be sharing thoughts that others find quite helpful, and at the next moment, you will hear other people's insights that impact you. I was recently in a group with a 26-year-old and an 18-year-old. I was regularly in awe of the truth they saw and the application of the word. I took notes on their insights.

*(3) Discipling relationships are customized to the unique growth challenges of the individuals, whereas programs emphasize synchronization and regimentation*

Programs generally do not consider the uniqueness of an individual's story and journey. You announce a new discipleship program that will run for 10 weeks and be done. If you have more than five people, you will march through the curriculum synchronized, covering content but with little time for deep personal application. Everyone must be at the same place and same time. There is little time to share how the biblical truth applies to their challenges and life circumstances.

But in the small size of a MicroGroup, we can risk self-disclosure and become known. We are known in the context of our spiritual journey—the ups and downs of our lives. The MicroGroup allows for customization: we are known deeply and uniquely in our journey. Let me tell the story of one MicroGroup.

- Billy was in his early 30s when we started the group. A month after our first group meeting, Billy got married. Nine months later, a child was born. He told us later that initially, he was not happy that he was in a group of men so much older than he was until he was married and had a child. Billy found our group a great outlet to share the relational challenges of a new marriage, and when a child entered the picture, he had others who were further down that road.
- Ron was in his 40s. His discipleship challenge was believing that God could be his loving Father. Ron was the eldest of 6 children. His father was a mean drunk. He beat his mother. As a result, Ron hated his father. His discipleship challenge...how could he ever trust God to be a loving father

when his model at home was a father he detested? Ron needed a profound breakthrough to allow his loving Father in Heaven to reparent him.

- Dave was in his 50s and a highly respected, mature follower of Jesus. In mid-life, Dave wondered if the insurance business was all that his life would be. He had a longing for more profound significance. A new life direction was birthed as he took a big faith step to give up the business he knew to lead a ministry for Christian business owners who desired to run their companies Christlike. It was a big leap of faith because he had to give up a steady income while building something entirely new. We had the opportunity to prayerfully see something new birthed in Dave's life.
- I was the eldest in the group. I was diagnosed with prostate cancer during our time together. The initial reports were a bit frightening because I had a very aggressive form of cancer. Like the men carrying the paralytic to Jesus, the men in my group prayerfully carried me through surgery into recovery. I am still here 15 years later, in no small part due to these men's loving and prayerful attention.

This is what I mean by customization of our growth challenges in a MicroGroup. Programs have a prescribed length; discipling relationships do not. Relationships adjust to the needs of the participants, which can be done in a MicroGroup. It is living life together.

*(4) Discipling relationships focus on accountability around life change, whereas programs focus accountability on program content*

Discipleship is not filling in answers in a disciple-making workbook. What we are after is life-change. What is the biblical word for change or even growth in Christ? Repentance. We come to a place of repentance when God's word reveals those areas of our life that are not honoring God, and we are convicted to turn our hearts in another direction. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says that the God-breathed word is profitable for "rebuking" or "reproof" (2 Tim 3:16). This will require introspection or self-examination. It is in this last element of life-change accountability that we get to the pool's deep end—mutual confession.

What, then, is the difference between a relational approach to making disciples and a program approach? In sum, it is the level of commitment. The program approach requires very little of the participants in a program. You can come to the program without prior preparation. You may be a passive member of an audience. There is little to no accountability for what you are learning. The relationships with others in the program are often short-term and, therefore, not very intimate or self-revealing.

A relational approach requires a big step up in the investment of your life. You enter a longer-term mutual covenant with your partners to deeply share life. The expectation is that you will come having completed a biblical study and ready to share your insights and application of the Scripture to your life. The journey can take at least a year to a year and a half, meeting regularly. You are also learning as part of the process to be able to create a similar experience with a MicroGroup for others.

## Conclusion

The ministry I have the privilege of leading, Global Discipleship Initiative, is focused on answering the question, HOW? How do we make disciples? How do we take Jesus' relational model and make it work today? Our answer is the MicroGroup as the container or context to grow disciples. We call these groups the "Hot Houses of the Holy Spirit." What is a "hothouse," also known as a "greenhouse"? A "hothouse" is a controlled environment that combines just the right conditions to maximize growth. I first thought of the "hothouse" when my wife and I traveled to Alaska in the summer of 2000 and heard tales of pumpkins becoming 500 pounds in a few months or dahlias the size of dinner plates. In Alaska, the sun barely sets from mid-May to the end of August. You have the sun for 24 hours. Thus, things grow very rapidly.

I thought this was precisely what I saw when I brought 3 to 4 people together for a year to a year and a half in a high-trust center, engaging God's word together. The core element that makes the difference is transparent trust. When we tell our story, warts and all, mutually confessing our need while having Scripture speak to the right where we live, we are being transformed into Christ's likeness. At the same time, we are not doing this just for our own sake alone, but we are being equipped to do this for others. You start as a participant, focused on your discipleship, then providing for others what has been provided for you. Over time, you have an organic reproducing disciple-making effort that infuses a whole new way of living into a church community. I sum up this profoundly simple approach this way: "When we place the content of a biblically based foundational curriculum (*Discipleship Essentials*) in the context of the transformational environment of multiplying MicroGroups, you have the means for growing a disciple-making movement."

Let me conclude by bringing this home with a personal story. I "retired" or, as I like to say, "redeployed" from my profession as a pastor in 2012. The last church I served was in the Western Suburbs of Chicago. The church was very generous with its pastoral staff by providing interest-free loans for housing assistance. As I approached the retirement date, I heard that our trustees had generously decided to forgive the loan to help financially set my wife and me up for our retirement

years. I requested an opportunity to thank the Board for their generosity. That night, I could not contain my tears of gratitude as I looked the men and women in the face who had been so kind to my wife and me. Within a couple of days of that meeting, I received a note from one of the board members who had been there that night.

Greg, your heartfelt remarks to the Board last night prompted me to reflect on your significant impact on my life, something I have not shared with you. Gathering around *Discipleship Essentials* was a turning point for me, transformational in impact and life-changing. Awakening God's call led me to confront my drinking problem, save my marriage, and renew numerous broken relationships. Thank you for being true to God's call on your life. It has changed mine. Blessings!

Disciple-making means getting into the trenches with others, as Jesus did with his disciples. It is in this journey together, with God's word central, that we are reshaped into a Christlike image.

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Greg Ogden

**Isus nam je namjerno pokazao model učenitva  
koji počiva na odnosima - zašto ga se nismo držali?**

Sažetak

Čitajući Evanđelja, možemo primijetiti kako je Isus namjerno i sa svrhom prakticirao učenitvo koje počiva na odnosima. U želji da dosegne mnoštvo, Isus se usmjerio na malu skupinu ljudi s ciljem stvaranja učenika koji će stvarati učenike i to iz barem dvaju valjanih razloga: internalizacije i umnažanja. U kontekstu bliskih odnosa Isus je htio sebe na neki način umnožiti u njih dvanaest. No postavlja se pitanje zašto Crkva u velikoj mjeri ne nasljeđuje takav model učenitva? U članku se navode dva moguća razloga: prvi je taj što propovijedamo evanđelje koje sadrži samo oprosteno, no ne i učenitvo, a drugi je razlog taj što smo Isusov model učenitva koji počiva na odnosima zamijenili programima. Uspoređujući razlike između programa i odnosa, u članku se donose dva provokativna zaključka: 1. Da smo mogli učiniti učenike propovijedajući ljudima, taj bi se posao davno već obavio. 2. Čak i najveći propovjednik koji je ikada živio – sâm Isus – nije se oslanjao na svoje propovijedanje da bi učinio učenike. On se oslanjao na osobnu povezanost..