

Cookie-Cutter Discipleship?

We need to treat the people we disciple as the unique individuals they are.

BY RANDY RAYSBROOK

Blame it on Fredrick W. Taylor. Through he lived a century ago, he may still be affecting your understanding of disciple-making. Taylor's influence was primarily in the industrial sector of America in the late 1890s. It was he who refined post-Industrial Revolution thought by advocating the standardization of tools and equipment in the factory. His ideas helped Henry Ford increase efficiency by focusing on method and speed. His formula: The greatest production results when each worker is given a definite task to be performed in a definite time and in a definite manner. For many years my concept of discipling others was a product of Taylor's thinking. Unwittingly I had developed an industrialized perspective. I looked at statistics at the end of each year to determine if I was being fruitful in my ministry. That was the "greatest production" part of the formula. I was very aware of how long it took me to train someone to the point where he could reproduce himself. That was the "definite time" component of the formula. And I had sophisticated and well-refined plans by which I trained. That was the "definite manner."

I had to face the gruesome reality that I had become more a disciple of Taylor than Christ.

There seems to be two extremes when it comes to helping another grow in his walk with God. One extreme says the Christian life is primarily relationship, and therefore if you just love someone he will grow and mature. The other extreme says you can't build without plans, and you must have a set of well-defined training plans for a new Christian. Plans assure direction and continuity.

Somewhere in between these two extremes we must find a divine balance that proclaims the primacy of relationship but also embraces the necessity of some order and structure. Without this delicate balance a discipling relationship could either become strictly social without healthy spiritual stimulation, or it could become a form of mechanical Christianity with its attendant hoop-jumping.

For years I trained people relying almost entirely on mechanical forms of discipleship. Bible study number four must always be followed by number five. You couldn't go to hoop number three until you had jumped through number two. I had developed every topic I introduced into a standardized form.

This excessive reliance on form over function revealed several things: an underlying insensitivity to the individual, a hurried approach to life, and a desire to see others grow at a rate I had prescribed.

Plans are not wrong, but they must not take precedence over people. How easy it is to fall into the trap of taking new disciples through the same training plans over and over again, forgetting the uniqueness of each person.

In recent years I have been forced to examine my whole approach to disciple-making. I have come to realize three principles that are far more important than any prescribed plan for follow-up.

A GOOD DISCIPLE-MAKER UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

The disciple-maker's history. Before we can help someone else, we must first understand our own background. Our approach to discipleship will be strongly influenced by our own past.

It is not only our spiritual training that affects how we disciple, but our family experiences, parental models, our own hurts, and many other factors we normally don't connect with spiritual formation. We carry the marks of these experiences in to every relationship, and we must be honest in recognizing that they may produce certain biases. Some people become better disciple-makers as they get older not because they have learned more techniques but because they know themselves better.

Being aware of our own history will enable us to encourage another in the same way we have seen God walk with us through our own trials. What better lessons to teach than the ones God has personally taught us? Paul said it like this: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

In addition, understanding our own history of growth helps us be honest about our limitations. Each of us has areas where we are not knowledgeable nor sensitive enough even to attempt to teach another. Wisdom dictates that we find others within the Body of Christ who can provide balance to the person's training. We must face the fact that we are not adequate to give someone all he/she needs to grow.

Remembering how long it took us to learn certain lessons helps us to be more patient with others when their growth seems sluggish. We quickly forget what slow learners we were as young Christians. I tell all disciple makers to pray regularly that God would never let them forget what it was like when they were new and struggling Christians.

The disciple's history. The disciple-maker must also understand the importance of the history of the one he is helping. For every one thing I share about me, I ask the person I am discipling three things about himself. What are

his family background, personal triumphs and tragedies, and past struggles with sin? What were the life-shaping events in his background? Knowing these, I can minister to real needs of a person's life as opposed to simply sharing facts.

This knowledge of the person's background increases my appreciation for him as a unique individual. It's easier to love someone when I see what he is as a reason of what he has been through. The more I know about someone, the more easily I can influence him. We make history as we understand it.

At an appropriate time I ask those I am helping to write a personal biography. It can include family dynamics, areas of strength and weakness, future goals, areas where God is active in his life, past triumphs and failures, how he thinks others view him, and desires for marriage (if single) or relationship with spouse (if married).

If I don't know about a person's history I may encourage him in the wrong direction. For example, many Christians are hard at the Christian life because they are still seeking the acceptance they never got from their parents.

Christians raised in alcoholic homes, as I was, have a tendency to become addicted to work performance instead of alcohol. If I don't understand his motives and how his background has influenced him, I may not be aware that he is doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

As I help someone, I keep my own history in mind and try to discover his. My effectiveness has changed dramatically as I have begun to integrate what I know about the individual with my follow-up plans and customize my encouragement and help.

A GOOD DISCIPLE-MAKER UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF TIME AND TIMING.

As a new believer, I was on a crusade to change the world for Christ. Sometimes it seemed as if God had made a mistake in allowing only twenty-four-hour days.

But several years ago I began to sense that much of the urgency I felt and sensed from others was not in balance with Scripture. Is it really true that if you don't seize the day God will be unable to complete His plan for the ages? Wouldn't that mean it all hinges on you, not God? I started to wonder how God viewed time.

Doing a Bible study on time changed my whole approach to life, holiness, and discipleship. I discovered that the Scriptures speak in terms of generations, forty-year blocks, four hundred year blocks. I speak in terms of hours, days, and weeks. For me, time no longer consists of units of measurement to evaluate my work. Instead it is a panoramic view to showcase God's fulfillment of His plan.

I am not in the hurry I once was because I realize God isn't. Concerned? Yes. Active? Yes. Rushed? No.

With this newfound freedom I found I was no longer pushing people to grow within my narrow time frame. The question was *whether* they were growing. If they were, then my job was to encourage and challenge them, not grade their growth by a temporal measuring stick.

In an article in *Christianity Today*, Bruce Thieleman described the process involved in making a perfect steel tube. He asked a steel machine operator about the critical elements in fanning hot steel.

"It's the temperature of the metal. If it is too hot, it will fly apart. If it is too cold, it will not open as it ought. Unless you catch the molten moment, you cannot make the perfect tube."

In each life there are "molten moments." Or, to put it another way, God has designed us in such a way that "windows of opportunity" open to our souls. When they are open, we are more susceptible to certain thoughts and actions. The effective disciple-maker learns to work with the Holy Spirit in determining those times.

A GOOD DISCIPLE-MAKER UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF ANTICIPATION.

A good photographer can project how a picture will turn out before he snaps the shutter. Based on his experience with film speed, lighting, type of lens, and a multitude of other factors, he can "see" the final picture before he actually takes it.

God sees us in the same way. When He looks at us He sees us as completed in Christ. Bob Foster says, "Jesus called [the twelve disciples] not so much for what they were as for what He could help them become."

In the same way we can begin to see others not for what they are currently, but for what they are yet to be. It was said that Michelangelo could see a statue in a block of marble. Each of us is a sculptor that God has entrusted with various pieces of "marble" people. Some are larger than others, some are rough and outwardly disfigured. But all await the refinement of the chisel. All are masterpieces yearning to be unleashed.

As disciple-makers we need to reflect back to those we help, what we "see" them becoming.

Goethe observed the power of this principle when he said, "Treat a man as he appears to be, and you make him worse. But treat a man as if he already were what he potentially could be, and you make him what he should be." People can sense intuitively whether we really believe in them. The people in our lives whom we have loved and been influenced by were people who could anticipate what we had the potential to become. The best teachers and parents do this instinctively.

What a person is becoming determines how he should be treated now. My wife and I were babysitting for some friends recently. I observed both of the small boys as we went for a walk. One, the frontiersman, charged out ahead,

eager to explore and make new discoveries. The other, more reserved, was the settler. He was happy where he was with no desire to risk venturing into the unknown.

Though they are brothers, each of these boys has a very different perspective on life and different needs. It would be a mistake to treat them both the same way. A wise parent would realize those differences and, instead of trying to change their temperaments, work at understanding each of them as individuals.

The task before us is to make disciples of all the nations (Mt. 28:19-20). And this process means winning and discipling people one at a time. The methods we employ must vary to meet each person's unique needs. We must guard against so standardizing our methods that we lose our sensitivity to those we are helping.

Perhaps we could revise Taylor's formula this way: The greatest glory to God results when each person is accepted in light of his own history, treated with a divine sense of time and timing, and loved with a sense of anticipation as to what he will become.