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PART I

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION

I never would have thought that addressing the question: “What is a disciple and how do you make one?” would have such far reaching implications. In seeking answers, I uncovered solutions for many of the problems the Christian Church faces today. Major problems such as:

- Pastor Burnout
- Follow-up and People “falling through the cracks”
- Church Growth and Attendance
- Church “Hopping”
- Tithes and Offerings
- Immorality in the Church
- Powerless Christianity
- Reaching the Lost

“What is a disciple and how do you make one?” In the two thousand years that the Church has had to address this question, you would think the answers would have been well known by now. However, in over 35 years of pastoral and international evangelistic ministry, working with virtually every major denomination, I found none who had any real insight about this subject.

My journey to find these answers began supernaturally. Like most every pastor, I was not satisfied with the level of spiritual growth I was seeing in the church. Despite applying my best preaching efforts and latest programs, most people seemed to languish on the pew year after year, staying essentially the same. As far as making a difference in the world around us, the world was winning. Divorce, fornication, back-sliding, and the “cares of this world” took their toll on the congregation.

Then in 1992, I was in my office seeking God’s direction for the church. Much to my surprise, the Lord spoke and asked *me* a question: “Where are you taking my people?” After gathering some composure and thinking about how I should answer, I had to admit I wasn’t leading them anywhere. I was just trying to keep the sheep from running away. I was in crisis management mode... putting out fires. Then somehow I had the inspiration to ask the Lord a question: “Where do you want me to take them?”

The Lord then showed me a vision: It was the present level of my congregation's development. How pitiful they looked. They were unequipped, unmotivated, and discouraged. They were in survival mode, barely able to stay saved themselves let alone bring salvation to those around them. When I asked them to rise up and take the city for Jesus (bring healing, blessing and salvation), they looked at me like I was crazy and began to complain about the struggles they faced in daily life. How could they take the city when they were just trying to keep from falling into sin themselves?

Then God showed me the same group of people, but now they had been changed. What a difference! They were "on fire"... consumed with the Gospel and the cause of Christ. The cares of this world had no effect upon them. They were bold and in unity. With power and confidence, they waded into the fray to take the city for Jesus. The Lord said: "That is where I want you to take my people."

At first I thought such radical transformation would be impossible. Then the Lord reminded me that in the military, they can take "mama's boys" and in a few months make mighty soldiers out of them. Is not our God able to take people and make them what He wants them to be? How could God call me to train believers to become like that and there not be a way? Thus began my journey of unlearning and learning... and discovering that God indeed has a Biblical way to train His people and make them into mighty disciples.

What exactly is a disciple and how do you make one? By God's grace, I have obtained answers. I pray the Holy Spirit take these living eternal truths and make them part of your ministry in making true disciples. Disciples like Jesus, the Apostles and the early church made...disciples that "turned the world upside down."

LESSON 1: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Are you satisfied with the present level of maturity in the body of believers where you serve?

Have the members of your church been properly trained and equipped to have a major influence in the community and on those around them? Are they "turning the world upside down?" (Acts 17:6)

If mature disciples are shown in the Bible to be walking in power and victory or "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37), then what percentage of people in your church qualify? How many disciples became mature in the last year? In the last 5 years?... 10?... 20?

NOTES:

LESSON 2: DO WE REALLY KNOW HOW TO MAKE MATURE DISCIPLES?

It is very important that we have a clear understanding of what a mature disciple is like. Why? Because we are commanded by Jesus in the great commission to make them.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” Matthew 28:19

We need to know exactly what it is we are making. What are the powers and capabilities of a disciple? What knowledge do they need to have? What is the function of a disciple? Just what kind of person are we producing?

The term “disciple” has become very convoluted over the centuries. If you ask 100 pastors this question today, chances are you will get 100 answers. Most of them will describe a disciple something like this: “One who believes in Jesus. They have been baptized in the church. They are good citizens, parents, or children. They love the Lord and each other. They are members of and support the local church and share their faith with others.”

While the above description is part of being a disciple, it falls far short of the biblical definition. If leadership does not know exactly what they are making, they are building without a pattern. Without a pattern there is no rhyme or reason to what we teach, when we teach it or to whom we teach it. This is why we go from message to message, meeting to meeting, and class to class without seeing real change in our congregations. There is *no intentionality* in the making of disciples, because we do not know exactly what we are making or how to make them.

For example, disciples are likened to soldiers in the Bible. Imagine you were called to make soldiers. You would need to know what a soldier was to become like. What training should he or she have? What skills do they need? How would you impart that training? After thousands of years, governments have a pretty good idea what qualities they want to produce in an individual soldier and how to create those qualities. But what if they said to the new recruits: “OK...you are in the Army now. Please come for training once a week... (That is if you feel like it). This week we learn how to salute. Next week we will talk for an hour on how to make your bed. I think we may do a series next month on the ‘Importance of the Gas Mask.’ For you more radical and committed soldiers, we have some optional training on Wednesday nights... did I mention there will be pizza?” With this kind of approach, how long do you think it would take to make a soldier? 20 years? 30 years? Would they ever become soldiers?

This may seem funny, but this is exactly the approach the modern church has taken in making disciples. Need we ask why the churches are powerless? Is it no wonder that church folk stay essentially the same year after year and our communities remain lost?

Pastors have not been trained about how to make Biblical disciples. Our Bible colleges taught us how to prepare sermons, preside over meetings, do counseling, give communion, do funerals and dedicate babies. We have a mind-set that our job is to make sermons... not to make disciples.

I think we would all agree that Jesus knew what a mature disciple was and how to make one. I believe that the Apostles and ministers in the first century knew how to make these powerful beings called disciples. We see it recorded in the Bible how the early disciples “turned the world upside down” for Jesus. But something happened... something the Apostle Paul warned about:

“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”
Acts 20:29-31 KJV

The prophecy of Paul came to pass in church history. Men arose that did not make disciples of Jesus, but after themselves. The church entered into a period known as the “Dark Ages.” The knowledge and skill needed to make true disciples was lost. As a result pastors and leaders today have not been trained correctly about making disciples or even how to be mature disciples themselves!

I was invited by a Bishop of a major denomination to teach their pastors about discipleship. After showing them in the Bible what a real disciple looks like, they had a refreshingly honest response. They said: “We are not disciples ourselves... so how can we make one?” I was blessed to be invited to return and help teach them.

LESSON 2: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Do you see a difference in the Bible disciples of the early church and the disciples of today? What are some of these differences?

Do you think those serving in ministry today received the same quality of training that Jesus and the Apostles gave the early church ministers? What effect does this have on the modern church?

Why would the author call the response of the Bishop and pastors “refreshingly honest?”

NOTES:
