

Training disciples in everyday life

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. . . . Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:18–20.

These are our marching orders. As disciples, we are to make new disciples. And we are to teach disciples how to live in obedience to Christ.

The biblical expression “make disciples” means to get up and walk alongside a willing person. It means to give and spend some of your life with that individual.

As you walk, you instruct and teach, understanding that the disciple is on the journey to *learn*. While you teach, you keep in mind that you also remain a disciple.

Discipleship training is guaranteed not to be easy. Behind the expression “make disciples” is the idea of trial, piercing, and testing . . . even death.

Authority

Making and training disciples. The audacity! Who gives us such an idea?

Jesus. He gives us not only the idea, but the command. And not only the command, but the authority. “All authority has been given to me—so you must go.”

The word *authority* is worth a close look. It’s the Greek word *exousia*.

In English, we have to use several words to get the full meaning of *exousia*. Ability, power, strength, competency, capacity, freedom, liberty, mastery, right, jurisdiction.

Which of these words appeals to you? Which of these do you feel a need for right now?

Time

If you wish to mentor or train people in discipleship, you must be willing and able to spend time. You might need to make a significant change in your current allocation of time, in order to fulfil this calling.

Jesus calls and appoints 12 core-group disciples—and “from that time on they would be with him.” Mark 3:14. “Jesus and his disciples went out into the countryside of Judea. There he spent some time with them.” John 3:22.

Jesus has three fleeting years to save the world. So much to do! And a brief space of time in which to do it.

So how does Jesus conduct his plan to save the world? By spending the majority of his time with disciples!

Is it 70 per cent of his time? Or perhaps 90 per cent? We don’t know exactly, but Jesus and his circle of 12 trainees travel, work,

learn, and live together. For the disciples, it’s not a syllabus—it’s a lifestyle.

Jesus’ model with his core group of 12 might not be feasible in its fullness for most of us today. But the principle is inescapable.

Time is the highest gift for discipleship trainers. Time is our stock-in-trade. It’s our resource, our product, our method. Giving our time is the way we give ourselves.

“I hope to find some time” is an attitude doomed for failure. Be the leader you are called to be! Designate time for discipleship training. Make the time holy by prayer and the Word. Plan the time. Keep it sacred. Never compromise it, and use it to the max.



Training

Barnabas and Paul spend time discipling John Mark.

Paul—often in teamwork with Luke, his life-long friend—disciples Silas, Titus, Erastus, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, Trophimus, Sosthenes, Epaphroditus, Epaphras, Justus, and Demas.

Look at these non-Hebrew names! Paul discerns that his mission is focused on the non-churched world—so it is mostly from the everyday world that he draws believers for discipleship training.

It is on-the-job training, as the Spirit directs. Each trainee not only receives, but also gives. Trainees fulfil unique service along the way, learning and growing as ministry plays out in real life.

Paul's discipleship training is not 100 per cent successful. Sometimes it's downright disappointing. It appears that the disciple Demas, for example, comes to a point where he abandons Paul in favour of love for the world. 2 Timothy 4:9–10.

In particular, Paul disciples Timothy. The two are close, just as John and Jesus were close. "I have no one else like Timothy. . . . He has served with me like a son with his father in spreading the good news." Philippians 2:20–22.

The apostles appoint leaders for each church—people like Aquila and Priscilla—fasting and praying for them, commissioning them, staying with them, spending time with them, at times taking them along on ministry adventures.

Paul sees his calling as two-fold—"I was appointed to be an apostle and a teacher."

Sometimes Paul invites believers along with him as he teaches, preaches, and heals. This is discipleship training! Sometimes our training is deliberate, intentional. Other times we disciple people while we hardly know it.

Look at the results—"So all the Jews and Greeks who lived in Asia Minor heard the word of the Lord. . . . The word of the Lord spread everywhere. It became more and more powerful." Acts 19:10, 20.

Can you imagine this level of success if the apostles were to have planned on doing most of the work themselves, without hundreds and perhaps thousands of believer-disciples?

No wonder Paul sees his specific calling as two-fold—"I was appointed to be an apostle and a teacher." 2 Timothy 1:11.

Not only an apostle, but equally a teacher. "Teacher"—the Greek word *didasko*—an instructor, one who enables others to learn so they can participate in the shared mission.

Presence

Spending time as a teacher and trainer won't work if you're not completely *there*.



If your mind is on something else, if you keep looking

at a clock, if you're barely listening, if you're losing the flow of the encounter, if you talk a lot about yourself, if you keep your mobile phone on for calls and messages, call it quits. Do not continue.

Get off by yourself, with God, and re-evaluate. *Lord, is this my calling? If not, show me another calling. If this is Your call for me, how can I give true spiritual direction—being completely in the moment with You and with the one I'm discipling?*

One night Jesus welcomes an intruder into his private space and time. A secretive visit from Nicodemus is an appointment of the Spirit; it cannot be rescheduled or denied. Look at the conversation, the attention, the focus! Think about the challenge, the questions, the dialogue, the teaching. This is connection. *Presence* at its finest. John 3:1–16.

Shortly after, Jesus designates not just a couple of hours, but two full days of unanticipated time with brand-new believers in the Samaritan town of Sychar. John 4:39–42.

Another time, he's *passing through* Jericho. But it's more than a passing wave that he gives to Zacchaeus in a tree. Jesus comes to a stop, eyes fixed on his tax-collector target. Then he adjusts his schedule, inviting himself

to spend the rest of his day in the house of the wicked little rich man. Luke 19:1–10.

After his resurrection, Jesus comes up to a couple of disciples and *walks along with them* for about 11 kilometres, from Jerusalem to Emmaus. There is questioning, humour, discussion, and teaching focused on Christ in the scriptures. Jesus stays with the two disciples that night, eats with them, prays with them. Luke 24:13–32. In this encounter we see the essential elements of discipleship training.

Making believers, making disciples—it’s a continuum for Jesus, and the heart-beat of it is deliberate *presence*.

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place.” Mark 6:31.

With me. Jesus consciously yields his time to the purpose and direction of Heaven. He gives the gift of *himself* in sacred hours and days with people placed in his pathway by the Spirit of God. This is discipleship training.

Look at the results! After Pentecost, church leaders are amazed at the ministry of Peter and John. The leaders see them as “ordinary men with no training”. Then they take a second look, and realise that these two disciples are fabulously trained and qualified, because they have been *with Jesus*. Acts 4:13.

When his mission is nearly done, Jesus speaks a report to his Father. “I have finished the work you gave me to do. . . . I have shown you to the disciples you gave me out of the world. . . . I gave them the words you gave me. And they accepted them. . . . Holy Father, keep them safe by the power of your name.” John 17:4–11.

Example

“Follow my example,” says Paul, “just as I follow the example of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 11:1. The literal translation is, “Follow *me*.” Do these two words ring a bell?

“Follow me” might sound precocious when it comes from our own lips, but it represents



the continuation of the ministry of Christ.

Follow me, Paul says, because I set a pattern of true teaching. Never does Paul suggest to Timothy or to any other disciple that they *belong* to him. It’s a horrible error to think that anyone we’re discipling belongs to us. Follow me, Paul says to Timothy, “because you belong to Christ Jesus”. 2 Timothy 1:13.

Any thoughts of ownership or lordship over a disciple will lead to spiritual manipulation and abuse. This disqualifies the trainer.

The discipleship trainer is not an owner or a lord. But he or she is authorised to serve as a pattern and an example.

This represents the opposite of the “Do what I say—not what I do” mentality. A discipleship trainer must not merely know the stuff; he or she must live the life.

The New Testament style of discipleship training is not confined to a classroom or a church facility. Rather, it is an approach of modelling, observing, listening, and experiencing—living the good life in the real world, fulfilling the mission, and learning on the way.

As a leader, is your spiritual life shallow or faltering? Here’s a solution. Find someone to disciple; and when that is done, find someone else. This will drive you to Christ—because it’s only to the extent that you follow Christ, that a disciple can follow you.

How can you find someone to disciple? It’s a subject in itself. But here’s the heart of it. . . . *Pray!* Pray regularly, specifically, for God to put someone in your pathway—or otherwise reveal someone to you—whom you might bless as a mentor or guide. Let it all be from prayer and from Heaven, from start to finish.

Suggestions

What will a discipleship trainer or mentor actually do in our context today?

Here are a some suggestions, recommendations, options—realising that circumstances vary enormously, and there’s no prescription other than the example of Christ.

1. *Understand your own gifting and calling.*

None of us can be all things to someone we disciple. The one you disciple will be more skilled in some things than you are. In some aspects you might teach. In some items you

might model and train. On some points you might simply affirm, encourage, guide. There is only one complete Master, and that is Christ.

2. **Arrange times to study the Word together.** Consider a focus on Matthew 25, Luke 10, John 1, John 15, and Acts 2. Also study a companion article to this one—*Hands up, disciples!*
3. **Lead discipleship training classes.** Make sure these are conveniently timed, practical, well planned, focused on the Word, and feeding into actual ministry in everyday life.
4. **Pray together with trainees.** Look for a variety of ways that work. Pray in person. On the phone. By internet chat. Have planned and unhurried times, as well as snippets of time grabbed from the routine of life. If you are praying one-on-one and the trainee is the opposite gender, arrange for another appropriate prayer supporter to pray with that person.
5. **Meet together in concentrated pieces of time.** Rather than asking the trainee to come to you, go to the trainee's home turf—a café, an office, an open space. Grab minutes of time for busy people—a lunch break, an early breakfast, a weekend afternoon. Be creative. How about a ride together to the trainee's work? What about an hour off work for the trainee in the afternoon, with employer agreement to work an hour later that day? If in-person times cannot be found, how about meeting via voice/video over internet? Note that it's best that a man be discipled by a man, a woman by a woman.
6. **Worship together.** There's nothing like shared worship of God to inspire discipleship. We're thinking here of spontaneous, informal worship one-on-one or as a small group—singing, praising God, enjoying an inspiring piece of music, reading Scripture aloud.
7. **Dialogue.** Discipleship training is not a time for preaching or lecturing. Learn about the trainee's life. Listen to the trainee's soul. Empathise with perceived weaknesses and failures in ministry. Connect through questions and answers, dialogue and discussion, always with mission in mind.
8. **Minister together.** Use your own direct ministry as opportunity to take trainees with you. Discuss with them how to observe, listen, join in, and reflect.



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with employer agreement to work an hour later that day? If in-person times cannot be found, how about meeting via voice/video over internet? Note that it's best that a man be discipled by a man, a woman by a woman.

9. **Ask hard questions.** When confidence and trust is established, be willing—as the Spirit leads—to ask hard questions. “What are you doing to overcome temptation? Are you being faithful to your spouse and family? Are you being honest in all your ways? Is there any discouragement or failure we can pray about?” This is accountability. Maintain confidentiality—those you disciple need to know they can trust you implicitly.
10. **Encourage additional support.** Help trainees identify additional people in their lives who can assist with prayer support and mentoring.
11. **Send!** Help trainees identify and respond to ministry opportunities in their everyday lives and in ministry assignments—according to their gifting and the Spirit's leading. Afterward, ask them to share conversations and interaction—maintaining anonymity or privacy as called for. Discuss and evaluate, with praise to God.
12. **Affirm and encourage.** Regularly send messages of support and appreciation. Texts, emails, voice or chat messages, and so on. Leave prayers or scriptures that can be read or listened to again in times of need.
13. **Observe.** Watch trainees at work in ministry. Encourage, give pointers, and reflect.
14. **Recommend resources.** Share techniques and tools specific to a ministry audience or task. Share articles, books, podcasts, videos, or testimonies that will inspire and instruct without detracting from time in the Word. Don't overload! Discuss these afterwards.
15. **Commission.** When a trainee is ready to plunge into a particular ministry, follow the Bible pattern of combined prayer, boldly asking for the Spirit's anointing for the task.
16. **Re-disciple.** Help trainees look for other disciples whom they might begin to train for specific lines of service. This is multiplication.
17. **Celebrate the blessing.** Get trainees together from time to time, to share their stories and to praise God for the way his Spirit has worked.
18. **Graduate!** It takes about nine months for a baby to come to birth—and it's a good thing when it does! Focused discipleship training might take place for nine months or a year, but then it's time for the trainee to follow the Spirit into a new phase of action as a maturing disciple of Jesus.

See also the companion articles, *Hands up, disciples!* and *Hands up, apostles!*