

Why Relational Discipleship Has Become My Priority

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Once when I was traveling in India a pastor made a tempting proposal. “If you come to our city, we will stage a big evangelistic campaign and invite thousands,” he said. “You can preach to all of them.” This man assumed I would be intrigued. After all, I could take photos of the big crowds and use them to brag later about how many people made decisions for Christ.

I didn’t accept the offer. Instead I gave the man a second option. “Let me spend three days with a small group of pastors,” I said. “Let me encourage them, and then they can go out and preach at the big meetings. They will do a much better job than I could.”

I’m not against mass evangelism. I’m not criticizing people who organize big meetings. But I’m learning that the best way to impact a large number of people is to focus on a few.

This was Jesus’ method of ministry. Most of his conversations in the Gospels were with His small group of handpicked disciples. Even when He did mass meetings, He used them to instruct the people He was mentoring. For 3.5 years He invested in His closest followers in a deeply personal way—not as an instructor but as a friend. Jesus did not mass-produce legions of followers. He hand-carved a few—and they became the pillars of the early church.

Jesus calls us to do ministry His way—by making disciples. Yet in today’s performance-based culture, we think bigger is better. We put all our money and time into splashy events while ignoring relationships. We want the sensational, not the simple. We crave big meetings, bigger platforms, noisy sermons, hyped-up altar calls and instant results. It may look spectacular on opening night, but the show fades fast.

This shallowness is killing us. Christianity in so many parts of the world is a mile wide and an inch deep because we think faith is best transmitted to people by preachers standing behind pulpits. Preaching is certainly important, but without personal discipleship leaders aren’t formed and Christians don’t develop true character. If this vital relational aspect is overlooked, our faith becomes programmed, superficial and horribly fake.

I’ve changed my priorities as I have grasped this truth. I’m not as interested in flashy conferences or huge crowds as I am in making an indelible mark on people who can then disciple others. And as the Lord has shifted my paradigm, I have become more intentional about making discipleship a part of my daily life. I’ve done this by following what I call the Five “I’s” of Discipleship:

1. Identify. Jesus prayed carefully before selecting those who would travel with Him. Paul selected people like Timothy, Silas, Aquilla and Priscilla to be his ministry companions. Who are you called to disciple? God connects people in discipleship relationships.

2. Invest. Don't look at discipleship as a program. It must flow out of love and genuine friendship. It is a precious investment of your time into a younger Christian. Paul told the Thessalonians: "We were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8, NASB).

3. Include. One of the ways I disciple young men is by taking them with me on ministry trips. I would have fewer hassles if I traveled alone, but my privacy is not that precious. In the last couple of years I've invited emerging leaders such as Jason, Steven, Vitaly, Khuram, Donnie, Felipe, Lyndle and Ryan to accompany me to various events. Investing in a disciple, to me, has become more exciting than preaching to a multitude!

4. Instruct. Jesus didn't lecture his disciples; He artfully wove His teaching into the events of daily life—a storm, the death of a friend or an encounter with a needy beggar. His teaching flowed out of His relationship with His companions. Discipleship does not have to happen in a classroom setting. It can happen at a doughnut shop, during a bike ride or in a car. Expect "teaching moments" to flow naturally when you are spending time with those you are mentoring.

5. Intercede. Paul told Timothy that he constantly remembered him in his prayers "night and day" (2 Tim. 1:3). The most effective discipleship occurs when the discipler invests time in prayer for those he or she is mentoring. After some of my young disciples gave me an iPad last year, I decided to return the favor by using it to help me pray for them. I now have a "visual prayer list" with photos of the people I intercede for regularly.

Floyd McClung, a former leader of **Youth With a Mission** who now lives in South Africa, says he wishes he had spent more of his time making disciples when he was younger. He recently wrote: "I've been blessed to do many things: books, conferences, television, etc. But that's nothing compared to pouring into others and seeing them go for it."

Leaders all around the world are coming to this same conclusion. They recognize that today's fatherless generation is looking for more than the hottest music, the coolest stage lighting or the hippest techno-pastor. They just want authentic role models who will spend time with them.