

Discipleship: Life and Ministry

*Crisis Centre
Ministries*

Bringing God's grace and healing love
to people with life-disrupting problems

Contents

Introduction.....	4
<i>The starting point</i>	4
<i>Giving up</i>	5
<i>Hindrances</i>	5
<i>Making the connection</i>	6
Christian Social Action.....	7
<i>An introduction</i>	7
<i>Attempting the impossible</i>	8
<i>Growing through doing</i>	8
<i>For example</i>	9
Following Jesus.....	10
<i>Life</i>	11
<i>Ministry</i>	11
What Next?.....	12

Introduction

All churches are in the disciple-making business. After all, it is what Jesus commanded: “Make disciples...”

We are often not very good at making disciples. Most Christian leaders recognise it is important, but for a number of reasons, it often does not have a high priority in our schedules.

Of course, some aspects of disciple-making do feature highly in most churches. We put considerable time and energy into preaching plans and teaching programs. We train counsellors, and appoint people to positions of responsibility for homegroups and other vehicles of pastoral care.

But, despite all this activity, very few Christians have the sense that they are being disciplined. Very few leaders are confident that they are adequately discipling their flock. And there is little evidence that the average Christian in the average pew is growing significantly in faith and maturity.

The starting point

When I talk with Christian leaders about what they want for their church members, most of them say they want their people to be doing more evangelism. But what do they actually do in order for this to happen?

Most of the time, what they do is very little more than to encourage the flock to bring their friends, families and neighbours to evangelistic events. And, most of the time, most of the flock are not willing or able even to do this.

It seems to me that evangelism should be a natural expression of a healthy Christian life. If the love of God is changing your life for the better, why would you not want to share it? If the transforming truths of the gospel are enabling you to make sense of and cope with a confusing and unpredictable world, why would you not be offering that same understanding to your friends and colleagues who are struggling and fearful? If you are seeing God’s miraculous power at work, transforming impossible situations, and bringing hope and joy in the place of despair, why would you not be offering to pray with and for the people you work with?

We do need to train Christian in how to share their faith. But, in the end, it is only *their faith* which they can share. If their faith is joyful and vibrant, it is easy to share with others. If, when they are honest with themselves, their faith is something of a disappointment, then it is much harder. And is this a faith you would want them to share, anyway?

If most of the people sitting in the pews feel that they are a failure as a Christian, you may be able to persuade them to do some evangelism. But what they actually do, even if they say the words they are taught, is not likely to have the effect you hope for. It is more likely to come across like selling a product than the precious offer of a new and better life.

If you want your church members to be sharing their faith in an engaging and attractive way, the starting point needs to be for the church members to enjoy a vibrant and healthy Christian life. If you want good evangelism, you need effective discipleship.

Giving up

Despite the problems, there is quite a bit of evangelism going on. The reason why many congregations are not growing is not a lack of converts. The problem is not that too few are coming in through the front door, but that too many are leaving through the back door.

Yes, we do have a problem in many churches of an increasingly elderly congregation who will simply not be with us in ten or twenty years' time.

But we also have the more serious problem of lively, active churches with plenty of younger people, where despite all the activity and faithful preaching and fervent prayer, the numbers are still barely staying level.

Some people do fall away from the Christian faith. This has always been the case. However, many of those who were once faithfully attending church services, but are no longer present, have not fallen away in the traditional sense. They have not renounced their Christian faith or rejected Jesus. They simply don't see any point in going to church. They weigh the options, and decide that a round of golf, or visiting members of their extended family, or maybe just catching up on their sleep, is more attractive than yet another church service.

It is easy for a young Christian to be enthusiastic. They are discovering new things, exploring a whole new world. They throw themselves into each new program, believing that it will play a significant role in extending the Kingdom of God.

But when, ten, fifteen, or twenty years later, they look around, and see that the church they belong to has not made any significant progress, and the world around them does not seem to have been transformed by their witness and prayer, then the enthusiasm is harder to maintain. When they cannot remember the last real answer to prayer, and when they cannot see that they are making any difference by being there week after week, it is hard to maintain church attendance as a high priority.

The problem, again, is one of discipleship. When people are growing in their faith, when they are learning to apply what they believe to the world they live in, and when they are seeing their work bearing fruit, then they will probably remain enthusiastic. It is easy to invest time and energy when you see that investment producing lives that are changed for the better and blessed for all eternity.

Hindrances

So... if discipleship is so important to Jesus, and so important to our church life, and so important to the long term spiritual health of our people... what is getting in the way?

Of course, there is probably some spiritual warfare going on. Satan does not like happy, healthy, vibrant and growing churches. But I suspect that this problem is not

going to be entirely solved by more fervent prayer, by re-dedicating ourselves to a life of holiness, and by casting out a few demons.

If we want our church members to be disciplined, then we probably need to be intentional and proactive about it. We need to take responsibility for making it happen.

We need to pray for guidance. But then we need to trust that God will guide us, and start to put into practice a bit more of what we know we need to be doing.

One part of the problem is that some leaders have been put off an active approach to discipleship by the stories of other leaders who have tried to do this, and when it has gone horribly wrong - often described as examples of 'heavy shepherding.'

The warning of these examples pushes leaders in the opposite direction: they do not engage in intentional discipleship, and hope that it will somehow happen in the middle of the other activity. But experience shows that, most of the time, this does not work out very well.

Making the connection

If you listen to most sermons, the practical application is fairly simple: we tell the congregation not to sin, and we tell them to love one another, to read their Bibles, to pray, to attend the services, and to tell other people about Jesus. Sometimes, we tell them what to do in specific situations. But we don't teach them how to relate their faith to the world they live in.

It is very easy to tell Christians that they should not sin. And, yes, that is a part of our message. Sin gets in the way of the real work.

Most of the time, telling people what to do does not work. Real life is far too rich and varied for simple strategies and pat answers to get you very far. The only way you can make this approach work is to get to know all the complex details of the individual's life... but then you get drawn into all the problems of 'heavy shepherding.' And it takes an awful lot of time and energy to disciple each individual this way.

But there is another way. You can be intentional about discipling your congregation without telling them what to do and how to live their lives. You can enable people to make the connection between their Christian faith and everyday life.

You cannot make Christians grow in their faith, but you can create a context in which such growth is encouraged and expected.

Many people experience life as a series of disconnected blocks: family, church, work, leisure. Sometimes they overlap a little - you bring your partner to the work Christmas Party, or do a 'social event' at church. But for most people, for most of the time, there is little real overlap.

The result of this is that Christian ministry - any outworking of the Christian faith they have - is usually understood as something which takes place in the context of church, at church events and with church people.

The challenge is to help people make the connection between faith and real life - between their faith and their family, their work and their leisure activities. The sort of discipleship we need to develop must link together Christian faith with ordinary life as well as with Christian ministry.

The way in which Jesus did this was to involve His disciples in on-the-job training. They were living and serving, meeting real needs in the people around them, facing up to real struggles within and between them. The teaching He provided to His disciples was given in the context of shared activity - shared work and shared ministry.

We cannot replicate this strategy by going on the road with a dozen followers. But we can provide most Christians with the opportunity to do something real and worthwhile, and to learn through doing it.

We can encourage them to get involved in Christian social action.

Christian Social Action

An introduction

We have to be careful about our use of language here.

By 'social action,' I mean some activity which helps other people in some practical way.

- It is helping people outside the church, while not excluding people inside the church from being helped.
- It is helping people one-to-one, as individuals - meeting them, listening to them and then meeting their need.
- It is helping them in ways they want to be helped, working with their preferences and priorities.
- It is helping them in ways which atheists and agnostics recognise are relevant and worthwhile.

By 'Christian social action,' I mean social action which is identifiably Christian. This is more than social action performed by Christians, and more than social action inspired by a Christian faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit. After all, that ought to be true of everything we do.

I use the term 'Christian social action' to refer to social action which also has the following characteristics.

- It is undertaken within the bounds of Christian morality.
- It seeks creative ways to implement gospel truths and Kingdom principles wherever possible.
- It is holistic, responding to the needs of the whole person, spirit, soul, mind and body, and the needs of the whole community.

- It is explicitly done in the name of Jesus, as His representatives.

I can explain the relevance and importance of each of these points if necessary. But not now.

Attempting the impossible

The definition of Christian social action may seem a bit daunting. It should be. In fact, what we are attempting to do should be impossible.

When you think about it, all Christian ministry is a call to do the impossible.

The healer cannot heal anyone. The evangelist cannot save anyone. The prophet cannot make his words divine. The teacher cannot bring enlightenment to the darkened mind, and the pastor cannot bring peace to the troubled soul.

All we can do is to be obedient, and to act in faith. We are called to act, knowing that our actions cannot do what is needed, but trusting that God will take our inadequate words and actions, and through His Spirit grant life and light.

It is not that we do what we can, and trust God to do what we cannot - although for many Christians, this would be a step in the right direction.

It is all about incarnation. We become the place where God makes Himself present, and through us He touches the lives of the people we encounter. When we feed hungry bodies, God is making Himself present: God is touching human lives in this practical way. And because God is doing it, even the practical and the mundane has a spiritual and an eternal dimension.

We do not use the practical ways we help people as an excuse and an opportunity to share the gospel. The practical love is an expression of the gospel, because God cares about our bodies as well as our souls. God is present, whether we recognise Him or not, in bread and wine - in the food and drink we provide.

God is present when we love people, when we care enough about them to care in practical ways for them. God takes the ordinary, when we let Him, when we offer it to Him, and transforms it. This is what God does. It is what God longs to do. It is what God has always done throughout history: He reaches out and touches the lives of the poor, the weak, the damaged, the needy. He touches their lives, He makes a difference, and He does it through His people.

If our aim were something we could achieve on our own, then we would not need God. And if we can do it without God, then however worthy it may be, it is not part of the process of Christian discipleship. Remember: our aim is to enable people to make the connection between their Christian faith and everyday life.

The connection is only being made if God is both present and active - if He is actually playing a role. Which means that we must be trying to do something we cannot do without Him.

Growing through doing

Christian social action provides a different model for Christian ministry, a model

which is accessible by all Christians.

The traditional model explicitly excludes most Christians.

- It starts with ‘the call’ - however this is understood, it explicitly separates a few Christians (the ‘called’) from the vast majority of their fellow Christians.
- It then involves a period of study, mainly academic, which creates another level of exclusion. Most Christians are not capable of the academic work required, and most could not finance several years of study at a Bible College or Theological Seminary.
- The trained Christian is then authorised to do things, often preaching and officiating at the sacraments, which their fellow believers are not allowed to do. This places another barrier between them and the ‘ordinary’ Christians.

By way of contrast, Jesus taught and practised on-the-job training and every-member ministry. It is an inclusive approach: all Christians are called to worship and to serve. It is an approach which holds together two key aspects.

- Doing something worthwhile – genuinely loving and serving others.
- Growing through doing – growing as a person and growing closer to Jesus through this practice of loving and serving.

If our aim is only to do good works, we will burn out. If our aim is only to train people, we may never get round to doing anything practical, and if we do, we may not actually have anything to offer the needy. But if we aim both to do good works and to train people, then the system works.

It is what we are taught in Ephesians chapter 4. God gave to His Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. But what is their job? Not to do the work themselves, but to equip the saints for the work of service.

You know how it goes.

- I do it, you watch.
- We do it together.
- You do it, I watch.
- You do it with someone else...

The training is relevant and helpful because it takes place in the context of real and worthwhile activity.

When people are faced with impossible situations, they know they need to learn, and they know they need God.

For example

This is not just a set of interesting theories. It can be done. Yes, there are dangers. But this is about discipleship, not just throwing people in at the deep end and hoping they will swim. We have to teach them to recognise the dangers, and what to do about

them.

All that we have been talking about here can be seen being worked out in the activities being undertaken by Crisis Centre Ministries. There are a number of reasons why this is a good ‘worked example,’ which we can explain if you are interested.

Once you understand Christian ministry in this way, you can see the the same principles being worked out in every area of service. The same principles hold true – they work – whether you are offering parenting courses or running a lunch club for the elderly, whether you are running a mums and toddlers group, or a Saturday morning football club for the disaffected local youth, whether you are establishing a choir or a support group for battered women.

Through involvement in the ministry, Christians discover that God can use them. They learn how to love people who don’t deserve God’s love. They learn how to love wisely, how to function as a part of a team, how to cope with not having all the answers, how to handle failure and disappointment, and how the smallest thing we do can sometimes make an incredible difference to someone else.

They learn that God is so much more kind and gentle and generous and loving than they ever realised. And they discover that sometimes His holiness needs to burn, because sin really does destroy lives if we allow it to.

They discover the importance of integrity and truth and courage, because in the long run, these are the realities which work, which actually change peoples lives for the better. They come to understand that faith, hope and love are not just Christian ‘virtues’ to be preached about and sung about, but they are the essential components of any life worth living.

They discover the truth of all this in their own experience, and they encounter the dreadful consequences of seeking to deny these truths.

Also, by encountering people who suffer from all the common failures and failings of our society, they learn how to respond in a sensitive and appropriate way to folk in need. They learn how to recognise the danger signals, and how to be helpful without imposing help – how to provide what is needed while enabling the person being helped to take proper responsibility for their own life and actions.

Following Jesus

Even if Jesus had not commanded us to make disciples, it would be clear from the New Testament that discipleship is at the centre of Christian life and faith.

The early Christians were described as disciples. They were all followers – followers of Jesus, and followers of the way of Jesus. His mission and His ministry were understood to be their mission and ministry. His life was understood to be their example.

And anyone who is interested in following Jesus needs to take seriously what He told us about the nature of His life and ministry.

Life

Following Jesus is about life: He promised that His followers would enjoy life to the full. This is the purpose of His mission.

Jesus was not a narrow-minded killjoy, whatever some of His followers may say. He enjoyed wedding parties and dinner parties, feasts and celebrations. He was full of joy, and His teaching was full of gentle humour and irony.

Life – everlasting life – is the promise of the gospel to everyone who believes in Jesus. We should therefore be celebrating life, enjoying life to the full, and using the life we have been given in the best way we can.

All too often, evangelistic testimonies say: I used to have an interesting life, but now I have become a Christian. What they ought to say – and what we need to be able to say with complete integrity because it is true – is that I thought I was living, but I was only half-alive, and now I have started to follow Jesus I am discovering that life can be far more exciting and challenging and worthwhile than I ever thought possible.

Ministry

Jesus also came to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. He had a mission and a ministry, and so do we.

Our enjoyment of life is not a selfish excuse to maximise our personal pleasure. We are not on a self-centred quest for personal development. We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. We are to pray and to work for His Kingdom to come – for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Our lives are tied up in the will of God and the Kingdom of God.

There is joy in following Jesus. But we discover that joy by walking with Him the way of the cross. Nothing worthwhile can be easy, and nothing of value can be gained without paying the cost. We are offered a new life, but we have to lose our life in order to find it.

What Next?

If this makes sense to you, and you would like to find out more about how to put these principles into practice, please get in touch with Crisis Centre Ministries ('CCM').

The common arrangement is for you to identify a small group of your members to volunteer with CCM for a year – if possible, from September to August. They will learn to serve and gain practical wisdom and experience through working alongside experienced staff and volunteers, and they will reflect on their experiences, learn the relevant facts and the underlying principles, and explore how to apply them in other contexts through participating in the monthly 'Helping Vulnerable People' training programme.

You can find out more by visiting the web site at www.crisis-centre.org.uk or by contacting the CCM office at

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We would be delighted to hear from you.

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