

Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc.

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The Relationship of Ministry and Discipleship

by Dan Trygg

If we could see the big picture of God's plan, what would we see as the most important aspect of ministry? What is it, of all the activities that the church does, that from God's point of view provides a focal point, or coordinating goal, that brings everything together? **What is the primary objective for ministry?**

It is my contention that **discipleship is to be the primary focus,**

not witnessing

not getting conversions

not cultivating churchgoers

not worship activities

not works of service

not religious experiences.

Discipleship, the process of following the living Jesus evermore closely, should be the underlying purpose for all of these activities. They either feed into or grow out of the discipleship process. Being and making disciples remains the goal that makes sense out of these various activities. Without an understanding of the primary objective, these practices can become so unbalanced or distorted in perspective that they begin to loom in front of the attention of the people of God as being what "real ministry" is truly all about. In reality, however, these practices are only to be subservient or incidental aspects of the great disciple making enterprise.

How can I say this?

The first place to defend this thesis would be to appeal to Matt. 28:18-20, the Great Commission. Here Jesus plainly commands us to make disciples. This is certainly the focal point of ministry that Matthew's gospel leaves us with.

In addition to this, however, Jesus gave us other clear indications that specify what it is that pleases Him in the way of ministry.

In Matt. 13, for example, there are three parables that reveal some specific qualitative tests we can use to evaluate effective ministry. Our meditation on these should cause us to reflect on what it is He desires and looks for in the fruit of a ministry, and how we can best direct our efforts to accomplish those things.

Parable of the Sower

What is the message of the **parable of the sower** (Matt. 13:1-9)? Jesus explains the story in vss. 18-23. He describes **four types of hearers**:

(1.) those who hear and forget;

(2.) those who hear, briefly respond, but ultimately forsake the message because of the difficulty or opposition it brings;

(3.) those who hear, respond, grow, but never come to full fruition because they are "choked out" by worldly distractions; and,

(4.) those who receive the message with understanding, those with a "noble and good heart" (Lk. 8:15), who hold fast to it, and *by perseverance* reproduce "30, 60, or 100 fold".

What can we learn from this?

First, effective ministry is not just "sowing the Word". Receiving the Word did not do much for the first two types of hearers. No fruit was to be found as a result of seed landing there. The third hearer, represented by the thorny ground also produced little or no return. It was only the fourth type of hearer that produced a significant return.

Secondly, there was nothing wrong with the quality of the seed, the problem was with the state of the soil. What are some implications of this?

- (a.) We ought to be prepared for the fact that **some will not readily respond to the Word of God.**
(b.) Unless God is leading us otherwise, **we ought to identify those who are responding well and work with them.**
(c.) Growth without full reproduction is not success. **Growth, maturity, and ultimately reproduction are in view as evidence of effective ministry.** Jesus' focus seems to be on transferring the vision to others.
(d.) We need to recognize that **what seems to start well is not necessarily successful.** Again, Jesus' measure of success is those who reach maturity and reproduce.

Parable of the Tares Among the Wheat

Another parable in this chapter, that of **the wheat and the tares** (vss. 24-30), is explained by Jesus in vss. 37-43. The emphasis is upon the fact that **fruit bearing is the distinguishing characteristic between those who are the genuine Sons of the kingdom and those who are counterfeit.** They may exist side-by-side together, and look very similar, but the true character becomes apparent as maturity begins to become visible by the *fruit* of the various plants. At the end of the age, the counterfeit "sons of the evil one", those who cause sin and do evil (vs. 41), will be separated and rejected by God. Then the genuine, the righteous, will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom.

What can we learn from this parable?

First, it seems that **the fruit Jesus has in mind here is that of godly character** versus evil character. This develops and becomes apparent as maturity takes place. Therefore, it would seem that **Jesus desires and requires righteousness and maturity from those who are His** (cf. Heb. 5:11-6:2; Eph. 4:11-16). Indeed, it is the outgrowth of their very nature to produce righteousness. This is in agreement with Jesus' definition of discipleship in Matt. 28:20, "teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you".

Secondly, it is obvious that ***being with* believers and *looking like* believers**, at least as they are in their immature state, **is not enough.** Churchgoing does not cut it with Jesus. Nor can you become righteous by association alone.

Third, it is **Satan's strategy to infiltrate the people of God with phonies to dilute their fruitfulness.** Count on it, there *will be* counterfeits among us!! From Paul's writings, we see that we are to confront and "remove" those who are the phonies (1 Cor. 5). Those who "cause sin and do evil" must not be given a free hand. They must be confronted.

Parable of the Dragnet

Next is the **parable of the dragnet** in vss. 47-50. **The kingdom will be like a dragnet that will "capture" all sorts of people. Not all of them are "desirable", however**, as Jesus reveals by speaking of the "sorting" of the bad fish, the wicked, from the "keepers", who are the righteous.

Here again, the main message of this story is that ***being with the people of God does not in itself cause someone to be acceptable to God.*** Responding to a message, or being in church, is not synonymous with being a "good fish" (cf. Jn. 8:30-36).

The Sorting of the Sheep and the Goats

In yet another parable in Matthew, **the sorting of the sheep and the goats** (25:31-46), Jesus once again underlines the idea that **to call Jesus Lord and to actually *be* a genuine disciple are not the same thing.** Obviously building on Ezk. 34:17-24, Jesus describes the judgment of the sheep and the goats.

The sheep are those who have been responsive to the voice of the Shepherd (Jn. 10:4,14-16) and have ministered to Him as they ministered to others in need (vs. 40).

The goats also considered themselves to be followers of Jesus. They call Him Lord, but in reality they have not been in tune to Jesus' voice. This is evidenced by their inability to hear or see Him in the needs of others. They have not lived for Him; instead, they have disregarded Him. Like the strong rams and he-goats of Ezekiel's description, they have bullied and oppressed the weak, muddied up their water and trampled their pasture. Thinking only of themselves, they greedily took the best, pushing and shoving other sheep aside. By these actions, they reveal themselves to be not at all of the same heart as the Good Shepherd. He laid aside His life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11). They do not walk in the servant way of the

Shepherd (Phil. 2:3-8), following Him and responding to His voice (Jn. 10:3-5,16). In stark contrast, by their selfish rush for the “first” and the “best” of all things for themselves, they have wounded, plundered, and driven away the weak sheep. The effect of their lives is like that of the thief (Jn. 10:10), who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. In the end, they will be exposed, rejected, and punished, along with the thief and his gang (vs. 41).

The lesson of the parable is that **true disciples of Jesus will have a heart for others, especially those who are vulnerable or hurting.** Why? Because that is the heart of the Shepherd. If they will follow Him, they will be responsive to His voice, His heart. Those who *call* Him Lord but have no time for others are not genuine disciples after all, but will find their destiny to be linked with the enemies of God. ***Being among the flock is not enough, it is the nature or character of the animal that determines its acceptability.***

Works of religious performance don't impress Jesus, not even “power ministry” (Matt. 7:15-23). **What counts is truly knowing Jesus intimately and bearing the good fruit that comes from a life transformed by that relationship.**

Again, the true disciples will *be changed*, and will *produce change*, as they mature.

God's Plan for Kingdom Ministry

God's plan for the ministry of the church ***demands* changed lives.** This is because **it has always been His intention that Christianity be *demonstrational*, not just *propositional*** (I Cor. 2:1-5). The powerful impact of the church was never intended to be primarily by persuasive speech, convincing argument, or by a well thought out system of thought.

The impact of the kingdom of God was to be seen
in the powerful actions of God in answer to prayer,
as He bears authenticating witness to the message by “signs, wonders and
various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 2:4),
by the incredible supernatural quality of life which is dramatically
displayed by those who are followers of the Way.

God's plan for ministry is essentially ***incarnational* in nature.** ***We are to be the display window of the kingdom by which people can see the reality of the gospel claims.***

In order to be the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:16), ***we must be drastically different than those who walk in darkness.*** We must stand out from our contemporaries in such areas as righteousness (Matt. 5), love (Jn. 13:34,35), freedom (Gal. 5:1; II Cor. 3:17,18), and intimacy with God (evidenced by answers to prayer and power ministry). ***This requires that we all move into maturity.***

Discipleship into full maturity is always the goal of the N.T. vision. Discipleship, then, must be the objective of our interaction with each other in the Body of Christ. It should be the focus of all of our activities.

Our objective, furthermore, should determine our strategy. We ought to be asking ourselves, “How can we *best* encourage one another to follow Jesus more completely?” (cf. Heb. 10:24,25; Eph. 4:15).

The objective also should become the standard for evaluation. Have we been succeeding in implementing God's plan for His people?

Do we see healthy discipleship happening in
(1.) our personal lives;
(2.) our church; and
(3.) throughout Christendom in general?

I think that the Lord wants us to have clear vision to see past strengths and weaknesses as well as to develop more effective measures for the church in our day. Those activities that efficiently lead us in that way should be encouraged and blessed. Those that are not establishing us in active, growing pursuit of Jesus in heart and lifestyle should be reworked or set aside.