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Discipling Strategies: Strengths and Weaknesses

by Dan Trygg

Having established that our commission from the Lord Jesus is to disciple all nations, it is profitable for us to review and analyze some of the ways which others have attempted to fulfill this calling. Obviously, this is a very limited setting in which to draw any hard and fast conclusions regarding the various strategies mentioned. The limitations of time, space, and our purpose for this discussion restrict us to raising issues and making observations. Furthermore, I have not attempted an in-depth study of any of these movements, but only draw upon my *perceptions* through my contact with them. Admittedly, such perceptions may be colored or distorted, or perhaps movements have adapted, changed and matured, so that my critical impressions may not necessarily be valid. However, the observations and issues that come out of my experiences raise important questions that any discipleship program must come to grips with, if they are to “operate with both eyes open”, so to speak.

All of the following strategies have been attempts in one way or another to “disciple” people. **The key idea has involved, for the most part, teaching.** In fact, the first strategy, that which has dominated the Western Church from the fourth century on, has focused on teaching as the primary responsibility, almost to the exclusion of anything else except church attendance. Whether it be the general “platform mentality”, which has dominated so much of Western Christendom, whereby a priest or minister “preaches at” a congregation in order to educate and exhort them to obedience, or whether we discuss other more effective attempts at education, such as confirmation classes, the Sunday school movement (19th cent.), or the Bible Study movement, which many of us have benefited from, we still come down to one common assumption. **We have believed that if we would educate people about what the Bible says, they will automatically apply what they learn in their daily lives.** *Knowing* will automatically result in changes in one’s feelings, will and actions. This theory, labeled “**association psychology**” by Gene Getz in Sharpening the Focus of the Church [(Victor Books: Wheaton, IL) 1988 Ed., pg. 120], has dominated most of our approaches to “growing up” Christians in the Western Church. **This psychological theory was popular in the 19th century, but has since been discredited.**

Knowing does not automatically lead to doing. Nevertheless, much of what we, as the church, have done, and continue to do is based upon this assumption, ...a belief that has been plainly demonstrated to be ineffective!

Bible studies, campus groups, and certain other groups within church circles began to stumble onto the power of the **small group dynamic**. These seemed to be more effective than simply going to church, but because the emphasis on education and teaching information was so strong, the power of accountability and an interactive format were not recognized as significant. Some groups naturally employed these dynamics, without consciously realizing it, and had a powerful impact. Most of these, however, degenerated into either social gatherings or association psychology-type groups.

A step beyond just the Bible study approach, or even the Sunday school curriculum, was the **Campus Crusade For Christ’s** insight of **transferable concepts**, coupled with their “win, build, send” philosophy. **Crusade’s real strength has been its action-oriented style of ministry that cements commitment with tried experience.** As people are won, usually through confrontational evangelism, they are quickly involved in “discovery groups” or “action groups”, which serve as inquiry/follow-up groups and discipleship groups, respectively. Here they are **led through a defined curriculum**, using their Ten Basic Steps to Christian Maturity or their Transferable Concepts materials. A significant part of the success of their movement has rested largely on the materials they have produced, and how they have used them. Their booklets were simple, straight-forward, and covered common questions or issues that new Christians often dealt with.

Because of their action-oriented approach to discipleship, they emphasized *the transferability* of these study booklets, i.e., once someone has been through them as a student, he can then teach them to another group.

Without a doubt, **Campus Crusade has been a highly successful organization**, having in less than 40 years trained multiple thousands of students and developing a larger foreign missionary force than any denominational group. **However**, in numerous and various exposures to them and the impact of their ministry, **I have identified some specific areas of concern:**

For example, oftentimes their canvassing campaigns have had a negative impact on people because they are sending out relatively new, highly motivated believers who, on the one hand, are not necessarily grounded in the Word or in people-skills, but, on the other hand, are armed with a “Four Spiritual Laws” booklet or a “survey” form. Their communication can appear “canned” or “insincere”. I know personally of several cases where the fruit has been “bruised” rather than gathered in.

Secondly, discipleship is a much more involved, long-term process than just running people through classes. Transferable concepts can be good tools, but may not go deep enough to meet the real needs of certain people.

Also, the emphasis on transferability, while being beneficial in that it gets people involved, **may encourage people to be leaders who have not yet gained the maturity to lead well.** As a result, some people may be hurt.

Finally, I have seen a very negative side to the “go with the goers” mentality. This is a “rule of thumb” which Campus Crusade has used to weed out those who would slow down the progress of the movement. If someone did not finish all their assignments, or show up to meetings on time, or dropped out, their people were trained to not spend extra time attempting to follow up with such “difficult cases”. They were to focus on those who were working hard, they were to “go with the goers”. Who defines what a “goer” is? Is it a certain level of religious performance? Is it being able to get to “X” number of meetings, or to finish certain Bible study assignments? **What happened to “help the hurting”?** What of those who *can’t* perform because of hurts or bondages within their lives? What of those who start well and then their performance falls apart? My perception is that Crusade’s ministry is very effective with a certain type of person, but not with everyone. Certain people who cannot perform consistently, for whatever reason, *will* drop out. Often they go away with a sense of woundedness or feelings of shame. As the group goes on, they get left behind. Furthermore, I have seen Crusade disciples grow up, become pastors, and apply this same philosophy in a church ministry. They have often left behind a trail of broken, wounded people, ...sheep without a shepherd who wanted to care for them. In a church ministry, we are responsible to care for the weak and wounded.

The **Navigators** emphasize a **one-on-one or small group approach to discipleship**. They have more of a long term vision, as well. They also use transferable materials, but they realize that it takes some time for a person to mature. Because they focus on discipling a smaller number, there can be more intimacy and personal accountability than in a larger group. In my perception,

the real strength of the Navigator approach is that they are willing to go deeper, try harder and be more comprehensive in their one on one discipling, while never losing sight of their vision for making disciples.

Their training program emphasizes basic Bible knowledge, scripture memory, and growing in a balanced life of obedience.

One key part of their vision, and a possible weakness for a *comprehensive* discipleship program, is that the goal emphasized is that of being a *multiplying disciple*, i.e., as the believer grows, he or she will begin to work with one or two others in a formal discipling time. While a noble goal, and one based on a scriptural model (II Tim. 2:2), it is *not* one that will fit every believer. Not all believers are called to this particular model of discipleship. The definition is too narrow.

Again, **certain disciplines and principles are highlighted that may not be actual biblical mandates, e.g., Bible reading or scripture memory.** These are *profitable*, yes, but *required*, no. The emphasis may put a false performance system on people. There will be some who will succeed and will turn out as prescribed, *but* there will be many others who will either

not get involved at all, because they can see that they can't perform the required disciplines, ...or they will try, fail, and drop out with feelings of defeat and condemnation that are not from the Lord at all, but from a man-made system. Once again, we see the heavy emphasis upon information as the key to maturity.

Another ministry model is the use of home **cell groups** to facilitate discipleship. On the plus side, cell groups tend to keep ministry in the hands of the laity, rather than depending so much on "professionals". They also tend to promote intimacy, accountability, and can be more adaptable to the unique needs of each group.

Cell growth and division will naturally introduce new people into ministry roles, thus giving healthy opportunities for stretching, experimentation, and growth.

Those especially gifted with leadership skills and equipping gifts will become evident as they naturally rise to the surface, by virtue of the successful impact they have in their cell groups. Leadership roles become available to those who demonstrate themselves to be able leaders, not just to those who have completed some educational requirements. There is a continual need, as well as the taught vision, for everyone to be further equipped for ministry.

Again, there are a multitude of real-life ministry examples. There are groups that are built around specific purposes, i.e., support groups, training groups, or ministry groups, etc. I would like to briefly mention three church models which would be especially worth examining:

The first of these is the cell group structure of **the world's largest church**, located in Seoul, Korea and pastored by **Dr. Paul (David) Yonggi Cho**. In Cho's church, the cells are organized primarily geographically. People meet together to be discipled/trained in a small group setting that allows for some measure of **intimacy and accountability**. In addition to the teaching aspect, there is an emphasis on practical love, the use of the gifts of the Spirit in ministry to one another, intercessory prayer, and on the evangelistic outreach of the church extending outward into neighborhoods primarily through these cells. One practical aspect of their evangelism model is that **they teach their people to look for needs and to somehow avail themselves to meet the needs they become aware of**. As they do this, they build relationships that establish credibility and expose people to the excitement of the gospel that they experience in their own lives. This leads to natural opportunities to share Christ.

While so much of this church is vibrant and healthy, there is one side to their approach that seems to me to be unhealthy. They are **highly centralized**. They strongly promote coming to the main home base church on Sunday mornings. People will travel a hundred miles or more each week just to be in church on Sundays. This seems to me to place too much importance on Dr. Cho and the home base. My perception is that it would be healthier to plant sister churches in outlying areas than to continue this practice. One positive benefit of centralization, however, is that it facilitates a common mindset and provides for a foundational focus for the teaching that takes place during the week. Dr. Cho also makes use of recorded messages and teacher training groups to keep the instruction content of the groups coordinated and under control. The negative side is that this structure could degenerate into a control mechanism of the flesh, or it could limit the creative expression of the "many-sided wisdom of God" (Eph. 3:10).

A second ministry model to mention is that of **Juan Carlos Ortiz**. In his church in Argentina, the method of discipleship began almost as an "**underground movement**". It started out small, with no fanfare or attention, and **spread relationally** throughout the body. It was never presented as a program, but slowly began to be a noticeable force at work in the body. Ortiz discipled his elders, and they in turn began to disciple others, until virtually everyone in the church was in a discipleship group of some kind. Like Cho, there was a way to incorporate **transferability**. In Ortiz' church, **a church mindset was established by "theming"**, i.e., by coordinating all study groups around the same subject matter. Instead of having several sermons or studies on unrelated topics in a given week, the entire church rallied around one subject area. The leaders had freedom to adapt their study to the needs of their particular group, but they stayed with the current topic of study. *As a church, they would stay with a particular subject area until the truth of the scriptures was pretty much incorporated into their lives.* This might mean only three or four subject areas per year, but they were truly "**teaching to do**" what Jesus

had commanded. Unlike Cho's church, however, Ortiz' discipling strategy was specifically designed to wean people from their dependence on the Sunday morning large group gathering. Ortiz saw this as part of a sick, ineffective system. He purposed to **decentralize** the ministry, so that the discipling activity within the church could truly be a **grass roots movement**.

A third model, one where discipleship takes place in a different way was pioneered by **Frank Tillapaugh** at Bear Valley Baptist Church in Denver. Frank really believes in the priesthood of believers regarding ministry. He and the leadership have tried to **create an environment that encourages people to come forward with their God-given dreams and visions for ministry**. As a result, they have an unusually large percentage of their membership involved in active ministry. The main focus of Tillapaugh's approach is to encourage **target group ministries**. These consist of individuals who have a similar burden to minister to the same area of need. As these people gather, they learn and strategize together to minister to their target group. **This target ministry group provides a great deal of support, equipping, interrelationship and accountability**. The strength of this model is the teamwork that develops in these ministry groups, as well as the great variety of ministries that originate in response to the Spirit's leading. This particular philosophy uses the cell group structure in an active ministry-oriented format. **Transferability happens at the vision level**, by communicating the philosophy of ministry to the body over and over again in a variety of ways. This serves not only to educate new members, but also as a method of providing balance and reevaluation for those who are already involved in groups.

One weakness that Bear Valley has identified is that, while these groups are great at providing support and interaction, they are not necessarily effective at filling in the gaps in peoples' lives or in covering all areas of discipleship. Therefore, they have developed a **spiritual planning ministry** to help their people become more well-rounded and mature.

Summary

In summation, there have been many sincere attempts to effectively accomplish the task of discipling people. Some have been successful to some measure, but history reveals that oftentimes there are inadequacies that are built into the methodologies of various groups, design flaws that hopefully can be improved upon by succeeding generations. Through this brief, and woefully inadequate, survey of my personal observations, it is hoped that some principles have emerged that can guide us in our attempts to lead, stimulate, and oversee a strategy of discipleship at your church. **Allow me to quickly highlight some of the key ideas:**

First, we saw that information transfer alone is not sufficient. Association psychology is dead and does not work. Whatever discipleship is, it must involve more than academia. Somehow it must involve a "teaching to do" or a "hands on" emphasis.

Secondly, we saw the value of transferability, the ability to pass along and use the same materials and vision. This helps to coordinate a people to enable them to work together toward a common purpose, with a common understanding. Also, transferability allows for the vision and the message to be carried to another place without distortion. In this way, transferability of something good, solid, and well tested can greatly reduce the amount of time that would otherwise be spent "reinventing the wheel". There needs, however, to be adaptability to unique people, groups, and circumstances. Ultimately, the goal is a *transferability of life*, a Christlikeness in character and purpose that will be the product of a healthy discipleship strategy.

Thirdly, we looked briefly at three models that employ cell groups as part of their strategy. Cell groups keep ministry in the hands of the people. They provide intimacy, equipping, accountability, as well as a laboratory experience whereby one's gifts begin to surface. They are labor intensive, in that they allow more people opportunity to minister than is possible in a large group setting.

Finally, any church discipleship strategy must be comprehensive. It can't be too limited in the kind of person it ministers to. We saw how structure, requirements, and expectations can begin to exclude certain people. Our call is to "help the hurting" as well as "train the soldiers".