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Personal Discipleship in the Local Church

By David Dunlap

In 1949, Ralph Shallis and his wife Rangeley went to the city of Algiers, Algeria, as missionaries. They would eventually be among the most effective laborers for Christ in the French-speaking world. In 1958, they moved to Arles, France, where they concentrated on reaching a younger generation through evangelistic and Bible teaching camps. The goal of their ministry was to reach influential and gifted young men whom they could disciple and train to reach the international French-speaking world. In time three young men were converted through Shallis's ministry — Marcel Tabailleux, Alain Choiquier, and Gerald Sanchez. Ralph Shallis poured his life into these three men. Eventually, these gifted and influential preachers led hundreds, if not thousands, of French-speaking men and women to Christ.

Personal Discipleship Is Fruitful Work

In the early 1960s, Ralph Shallis began a thriving work in Grenoble, France, among college students. After two years he left the work in the hands of Marcel Tabailleux. Under Marcel's leadership two other assemblies were soon established. Marcel was an indefatigable worker, bubbling over with new ideas and boundless energy. He started a gospel newspaper, *Defi*, which had a very large circulation. Eventually, hundreds were saved through these assemblies and a vigorous college outreach was established. Alain Choiquier went on to be a powerful evangelist, traveling and speaking to large audiences in the French-speaking world. Some called him the "Billy Graham" of the French-speaking world. Later, Gerald Sanchez settled in Paris, France, and had an effective evangelistic and Bible teaching ministry among the assemblies in that city.

It's almost impossible to measure the impact that these four godly, gifted laborers had for Christ. Ralph Shallis wrote only one book in the English language, *From Now On*, and his name largely forgotten, but his spiritual impact lives on. How did this great work start in France? It was made possible through the years of painstaking and effective discipleship work. May we give ourselves more and more to the work of discipling of believers.¹

“You can lead a soul to Christ in from 20 minutes to a couple of hours. But it takes from 20 weeks to a couple of years to get him on the road to maturity, victorious over the sins and the recurring problems that come along.”

Dawson Trotman
from *Born to Reproduce*

“If we delete the comma after the word “saints,” we receive the full force of this statement: “for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry.” Gifted people should help to equip others to carry out the work of winning people to Christ, shepherding the flock, and teaching God’s Word.”

Dr. John Phillips
(1927-2010)

What Is Discipleship?

A disciple is a student and a learner. The Greek word for “disciple” is *Mathitis*, meaning student from which we get our English word *Math*. Discipleship is the process by which the master or teacher trains the student in his doctrine and practice. It is seen in the way the Lord Jesus appointed the twelve disciples, “That they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). It is also seen in Paul’s instruction to Timothy: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Discipleship is on-the-job training. A Christian must be introduced to service for the Lord, the discovery of his or her spiritual gifts, faithfulness, love for Christ, worship, evangelism, and many other aspects of the Christian life. Christian discipleship is Christian living. This was the Lord’s divine method. He lived with the twelve, teaching them by word and example, and sent them forth to preach. His method must be the best! If there was a better way, our Lord would have employed it.

To be one who invests his life in others seems intimidating to many. In discipling others, you make yourself vulnerable. Your disciple will get to know you as you really are—warts, wrinkles, and all. Do not worry, for young people and new believers do not expect perfection; they just want sincerity and transparency. Every true follower is a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal of discipleship is that the learner becomes like his teacher. “It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master” (Matthew 10:25).

The “How” of Discipleship

Discipleship is more than merely reading a Christian book. It is the day in and day out training in Christian living. It means spending time with a group of believers or a mentor, engaging in various forms of Christian service. In the case of men, it might mean becoming involved in such ministries as preaching, teaching, personal evangelism, open-air evangelism, counseling, and visitation. In the case of women, it might mean teaching as in Titus 2:3-5, (that is, women teaching other women), counseling, and visitation.

As a disciple exposes himself or herself to these activities, he will soon be able to recognize his spiritual gifts and begin to serve independently. He or she then should find one or more young believers whom he could disciple. The discipler should be a patient friend, since the learner’s progress might be slow. The disciple should be committed and faithful to the time agreed upon; otherwise little spiritual growth will be made. Dawson Trotman (1906-1956), the founder of the *Navigators*, used to say, “Disciples should be F-A-T Christians: Faithful, Available, and Teachable.” The mentor should not be too rigorous or demanding. He should take time to listen. It is good if he can meet with the one whom he is discipling on social or athletic occasions and be ready to meet at unscheduled times to help in times of crisis. Rather than following the same stereotyped program for each person, the discipler should look to

the Holy Spirit for individual guidance. The Lord will give blessing to both the disciple and discipler.

A good place to start in mentoring a young believer is with a “Daily Quiet Time.” The mentor should show how he reads the Bible, gets a message from the Lord, and prays effectively. Every disciple should be a serious student of the Word. If the disciple is going to share publicly from the Word, he must know the Word. If he is going to answer critics and skeptics, he must have a firm grasp on Bible doctrine and apologetics. The mentor should encourage the young disciple to give his testimony at a meeting, and show the new believer how to verbally participate at the Lord’s supper, and join with others at a prayer meeting.

Disciple By Example

When a military commander leads his men into battle, he doesn’t sit back while they charge into enemy territory; he goes before them into the fight. A soldier has already learned the basics of military combat and has had practical training, but now he puts it into practice by following his commander’s example. The Lord Jesus Christ followed this same pattern, we read in Acts chapter one, “...all that Jesus began to *do* and *teach*” (Acts1:1).

In Christian discipleship, the failure to follow this model is the reason why so many discipleship initiatives have failed. Church leaders have no problem finding teachers to handle the book learning. Many are willing to teach and instruct in a classroom, but few are willing to make a personal investment in a disciple’s life. May we seek to be mentors who are passionate about being living role models to a disciple.

For too long, those involved in discipleship work have been satisfied with imparting tons of information to their disciples, without the balance of personal and ongoing involvement in their lives. A disciple needs a mentor who will be an example and a model of true living. The apostle Paul writes, “Be followers of me, even as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

The Biblical Basis of Discipleship

The biblical foundation of discipleship is found in Paul’s instruction to Timothy: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). There are two key phrases in this verse: first we read, “the things you have heard”; then secondly, “commit these to faithful men.” The first phrase involves teaching and the passing on of doctrine; the second phrase involves personal involvement, example, practical imparting of character, and training in serving God. In this verse, we see also how the task of discipleship passes on spiritual maturity from one generation to the next. We can easily see that there are four generations of believers in this one verse—first Paul, then Timothy, on to faithful men, and then others. The expansion of the Christian faith depends on the active involvement of every Christian in this multiplication process.

The apostle Paul unfolds another key biblical building block of discipleship in Ephesians 4. The apostle writes: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles

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John MacArthur
(1939-present)



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some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for (to do) the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

The key phrase in this passage is "equipping the saints for (to do) the work of the ministry." Those who minister the Word of God (evangelists, pastors, teachers) have a key role in equipping, discipling, or training believers to be able to teach the word of God and to serve the body of Christ. The word "equipping" comes from the Greek word *katartismos*, which means to make whole or complete. It is a medical term which has been used when speaking of the setting of a broken bone.

John MacArthur (1939-present) writes in his commentary on the book of Ephesians:

*The first task within God's design is for the evangelists and pastor-teachers to be properly equipping the saints.*²

Conclusion

Dawson Trotman (1906-1956), the founder of the *Navigators*, who was a pioneer in the area of the discipleship of believers, used to say, "The greatest amount of wasted of time is the time not getting started." May we not waste time getting started in the area of discipleship. One of the saddest events is to see a zealous new believer floundering in his Christian life because there was no one who would take an interest in discipleship. Is there a young believer in your local church who needs you to come alongside and disciple him? May you take up that important task today.

Endnotes

1. Fredrick Tatford, *That the World May Know: European Evangel*, (Bath, GB: Echos of Service, 1983), p. 147,152
2. John MacArthur, *Ephesians*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1986), p. 152