

John 17:1-19; Hebrews 5:11-6:3

3.10.10

I am of the view that Jesus is the master disciple-maker. I don’t believe anyone has improved on His strategy. In fact, some of the best training methods down through the centuries have simply copied Jesus. Apprentices were trained traditionally, using Jesus’ model. I have recently learnt a little about the training of knights. By-and-large, it used Jesus’ method. Because we are students of Jesus, let’s look at how Jesus made disciples and seek to imitate Him. Discovering His approach will be the key to being effective.

Well, it is pretty obvious, isn’t it? Disciple-making requires that we wear sandals and grow beards; we select 12 men and we live together, for three years, in Israel.

That might actually work. It did work for Jesus. However, they are not the essential components. There are other aspects that I think are essential. We might try to do it differently. We might want to cut some corners, but I think we will not see the results either. It pays to study the Master and to imitate Him.

The first thing we learn from Jesus is that **disciple-making is relational**. We would prefer to achieve it using programmes. The typical method for what is called “discipling” is a short, maybe 6-week, course for new Christians in which they learn the basics about Christianity and Christian living. It wouldn’t be unknown for new Christians to be given material to work through all by themselves, meaning no relationship, and growth as a disciple being seen as acquiring a certain amount of basic knowledge.

Jesus commands us to teach them to obey everything He has commanded and that can’t be done in six weeks. But besides that, Jesus modelled relationships, not programmes.

Proverbs 27:17 says, *“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”* We learn from each others. We learn in community. We learn as we listen to other people and watch them. We learn when things go wrong and we have to apologise or patch up a relationship. We learn by doing things together.

On Thursday I mentioned Mark 3:14 which says that Jesus appointed twelve that they might be with Him. That was the key to discipling – being with Jesus. They listened to Him, they watched Him, they ate with Him and did the dishes with Him and journeyed with Him and asked questions and grappled with His questions. They saw Jesus teaching and healing and dealing with opposition and getting discouraged and befriending outcasts. They learnt massive amounts just by watching Jesus.

In Acts 4:13, when the rulers and elders and teachers of the law put Peter and John on trial, we read...

Acts 4:13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

What had turned these unschooled men into courageous healers and preachers? They had been with Jesus.

Discipleship is caught more than taught. Jesus’ method is relational.

Secondly, Jesus was very **intentional**. We talked about this on Thursday. Remember when Jesus called the first disciples, He said, “I will make you fishers of men.” And Mark 3:14 tells us that Jesus chose the twelve to be with Him *that He might send them out* (to preach and to cast out demons). He started the process with the end in mind. He knew what His objective was. It was to make missionaries.

From that point on, Jesus was very intentional about growing those men and readying them. We see His purposefulness in the strategic way He went about it.

John 17 contains Jesus’ prayer, prayed at the Last Supper. He prayed for these 11 men who had been with Him. It is fascinating because Jesus said to God that He had finished the work He had given Him to do. He had not yet gone to the cross so we might wonder how He can say he has finished His work. The

general explanation is that Jesus is speaking *as if* the cross was behind Him but maybe the context suggests He was talking about a work that He had finished. This section of the prayer is all about His input into the lives of His disciples. **READ John 17:1-19.**

I have revealed you to them. V.6
 They have obeyed your word, v.6
 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. V.7
 I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. V.8
 They know with certainty that I came from you. V.8
 I pray for them. V.9
 Glory will come to me through them. V.10
 They will be in the world. V.11
 I protected them. None has been lost (except Judas). V.12
 I have given them your word. V.14
 They are not of the world, just as I am not. V.16
 Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth. V.17
 As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them. V.18
 I sanctified myself that they might be truly sanctified, v.19

Jesus prayed, "Father, I have invested in these men just as You asked me to and I have completed that task. They now believe." Four times Jesus refers to the word. I have given them your word. They have believed your word. Sanctify them by your word. The word of God must be central to our disciple-making. "I have protected them. I have prayed for them. And now they are ready to be sent into the world." Maybe the work that Jesus had completed was the work of making disciples who were now ready to be sent into the world. Jesus' prayer was about having completed that task.

Yes, this is a prayer for unity but it is also Jesus still thinking and acting and praying as a disciple-maker.

You will remember too that Jesus then, in John 17, prays for those who would believe in Him through the message of the apostles. In fact, Jesus starts the prayer by praying about Himself, then his disciples, then his disciples' disciples. There are three generations in view in this prayer. In fact, there are multiple generations because Jesus intended that this process would continue. Every succeeding generation has come to believe because of the message of the eleven, passed on from one generation to the next.

This prayer not only demonstrates the intentionality but, again, how relational it was. I have revealed You. It is not just that Jesus has passed on theoretical concepts. In His own person, He had revealed God. They had walked with God. I have given them your word. I pray for them. I have protected them.

Besides anything else, just seeing how intensely Jesus prays for His disciples shows His love for them, His desire that they be effective in the world and His focus on preparing these disciples for ministry.

Jesus' disciple-making was relational and intentional. It was also **focused on a small group**. Jesus obviously did have a mass ministry but it was focused much more on just twelve men.

Jesus chose to go for quality rather than quantity. He could have had hundreds of so-called followers, partially trained. Instead he opted for 12 who would be highly trained; twelve who had observed Him in all manner of situations and who had heard Him at length and who had been given ministry opportunities and had had the chance to de-brief with Jesus afterwards.

It seems like a huge risk to rely on eleven men who had not shown great promise and had quite often frustrated Jesus with their slowness. But actually quality produces quantity. Quality disciples will make more disciples. And the biblical principle is multiplication which very quickly produces quantity. Could the crowds have been relied on to make more disciples? Absolutely not. But these men had been trained.

Disciple-making is about depth not breadth. Disciple-making producing quality followers of Jesus.

Quality followers will soon make more.

Jesus also led the disciples through **growth stages**. Different scholars and authors describe those stages differently. It is possible to use a human analogy and talk about birth and infancy and childhood, youth, adulthood, with the goal of full maturity. When we raise children we know what stage they are at and we treat them accordingly. We don’t send six year olds to university. We treat six year olds as six year olds but always wanting to see growth. Similarly, in growing Christians, we need to know what stage they are at and what input or training is appropriate. We don’t want to assume new Christians are mature and we don’t want to try to re-convert mature Christians.

READ Hebrews 5:11-6:3. The writer knew that his readers should be teachers but actually were still babies needing milk not solid food. There shouldn’t have been the need to repeat basic teaching but, in fact, they did need to. It is just wrong and frustrating that these people haven’t grown and aren’t teaching. Should the people in our churches be teachers by now? Are they?

Jesus was sometimes frustrated that the disciples were so slow. He knew what they should have understood and what they should have been able to do but He also knew where they were actually at.

Can I suggest one way of describing the stages of a Christian’s growth?

The come and see stage. In John 1 in particular, there is a theme of “come and see”. It seems that Jesus simply invited people to go with Him and observe. There is no commitment involved. They possibly went back to their fishing in between but they had opportunities to watch.

But then came **the “follow me” stage**. Jesus walked along the lake front and challenged Peter and Andrew, James and John to follow Him. Now a commitment was required. Would they or would they not? “You have seen me in action. Will you follow me?”

Some time later (and it may have been 1 to 2 years later) Jesus invited twelve of them to be with Him. **The “be with me” stage** is about much more focused one-on-one time with Jesus. The twelve were selected for more individual attention and more focused training.

As part of that, they were given practical ministry assignments. When the crowd of 5000 men plus women and children was hungry, Jesus said, “You feed them.” That was a test. What would they do? Given what they were learning about Jesus, what should they have done? They didn’t have a clue what to do. They had no expectation of a miracle. Jesus had to take over but even then He gave the bread and fish to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. The disciples had to take a step of faith and take those meagre portions to the crowd not knowing what would happen or whether they would simply look silly.

Jesus got them involved. He sent them out to preach the good news of the kingdom, heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead, long before we would probably think they were ready. Then they came back and reflected with Him on the experience.

Part of the “Be with me” stage was a **“you do it” stage**. Practical ministry under supervision.

Ultimately there was **the “Go” stage** when they graduated and were commissioned to make disciples themselves. Whereas they had so often been so inept, they got to the point where Jesus trusted them to go solo. He would no longer be with them. They would still require the empowering of the Holy Spirit but, with that one proviso (and it is interesting that Jesus emphasised in all of the versions of the Great Commission that they would need the Holy Spirit and that they should not try to minister until they had received the Holy Spirit) with that one proviso, they were ready. They had been trained. They knew what to do. They had seen Jesus do it. They could graduate. They could be commissioned.

Very obviously Jesus gave the disciples large amounts of **time**. He **modelled** what He wanted to see in them and urged them to imitate Him. He **taught**. He **questioned**. He **gave them authority**. He **rebuked**.

He did all sorts of things – more than we can cover today.

Are those essential? Can we make disciples without investing time? Can we do it properly without significant relationships? Can we do it without setting an example for others to follow? Can we do it if our example doesn't match our words?

I think they are essential. I don't think anyone has yet improved on Jesus but here we have a problem. Doing it Jesus' way is hard – maybe too hard. I have found that people react against making disciples if it requires time and relationships and modelling what we want to see in others. We would rather use programmes. Relationships are time consuming and messy. Relationships have the potential to be painful and disappointing. We are not even sure that we can have relationships that are good enough to sustain intentional growth. It suggests a depth of relationship that frightens us. We don't have time to invest in people. Let's find another method that doesn't require copious time.

It seems impertinent to talk about someone's growth stage. It is something you simply don't talk about. We would never suggest that someone was immature.

We also squirm at the idea of a mentoring relationship that implies that the mentor is more mature than the disciple. We don't like any suggestion that one person might be more mature than another.

There's lots about Jesus' approach that we don't like. But what are our results like compared with His? We have not yet discovered a more effective way than the one Jesus modelled for us.

Many of us have never been intentionally discipled. We haven't experienced it and so we fear we don't know how to do it. It hasn't been modelled for us because no one took this interest in us.

True, but it has been modelled by Jesus. Yes, we are at a disadvantage. We are asked to do something that we haven't experienced. It is like asking people who didn't have good parents to be good parents. But we can learn from Jesus. We can start a new cycle of making disciple-making disciples. It will take commitment. It will take real disciples – disciples utterly committed to Jesus – to do it.

How did Jesus do it? How we can implement whatever He did in our context?

Can we, as individuals, have time to have relationships with just a few people because we want to invest in them?

Most of our churches have established relationships for pastoral care. We allocate certain people to care for other people. We do it for people's wellbeing. Could we do it for people's growth? If we have some growing, committed Christians could we match them to some people who are eager to grow and ask them to spend time together each week or each fortnight?

If they are not sure what to do, there are resources that they can work through together. Just that would pick up several aspects of what Jesus modelled: the intentionality, the relational nature, the investment of time, the mentoring.

Learning from the Master is a bit daunting. Jesus' methods are radical. We struggle with them. But they also make it possible. We don't have to make up a method of making disciples. Jesus models the best possible method. We just need to be willing to learn from Him and then figure out how we can apply the principles in our setting.

It will always remain challenging. Investing in people with this level of intentionality; deciding to make followers of Christ who will lay down their lives for Him is radical. It will attract criticism and it will have its disappointments but it is also the one thing worth doing. There is nothing more worth devoting our lives to than making disciples of Jesus Christ – real disciples of Jesus Christ – committed disciples of Jesus Christ – mature, trained disciples of Jesus Christ who will also make disciples of Jesus Christ.