
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Making Disciples: Part One

Pastors seize an adventurous, daring enterprise—making disciples of all people! The last words of Jesus to his disciples included a command to “make disciples.”

The word Jesus used—*disciple*—is found only in the Gospels and Acts, not appearing in the Epistles at all. Neither Paul nor Peter used the word, in part because it is a descriptive term, more suitable for biography than for doctrine or exhortation. *Disciple* is synonymous with *Christian*, i.e. a true believer (Acts 11:26). In general, *disciple* describes a person who follows Jesus, learning from him. This includes men and women (Luke 14:26; Acts 9:36), with wide ranging levels of commitment, from the merely interested to the strongly committed, from the mature to the immature (John 6:66; Matthew 26:56; Acts 6:7; 14:21). Thus, pastors work to enroll as many people as possible in Christ’s school to learn of him.

The church is its own discipleship model. It has an internal organization and climate, which blend together in a supernatural way to develop disciples.

The ministry of the early disciples demonstrates two types of disciple-making processes: public and private. For example, Peter preached *publicly* on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14) with the result that some 3,000 people decided to follow Christ. A short while later, he spoke *privately* in the home of Cornelius where many believed in Christ (Acts 10:23-24). Philip evangelized *publicly* in Samaria (Acts 8:5), then spoke *privately* with an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26). Paul proclaimed Christ *publicly* in Damascus (Acts 9:20) and some time later dealt *privately* with Timothy (Acts 16:1-2). Jesus modeled the same rhythm of public and private ministry. He spoke *publicly* to masses of people (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:29-38). Yet, he engaged in intense *private* teaching and training of his small group of disciples (Matthew 16:13-28; 17:13).

The rhythm of disciple making flows back and forth between these two

Are you searching for a leadership coach? Email Dr. Gary L. McIntosh at cgnet@earthlink.net for full details.

dynamics—public and private—in the life of a church. Allow me to offer two definitions. *Public discipleship* is the process of spiritual growth that takes place in all believers as they are exposed to, and involved in, the life of a local church. *Private discipleship* is the intense concentration of attention on a person or small group of people for the purpose of leadership development.

Public Discipleship

God has initiated processes in a local church, which result in the discipling of its members. An overview of this idea, but not an exact process, is presented in Ephesians 4:11-16. In this well-known passage of Scripture, Paul explained that Christ gave leaders—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—for the “equipping of the saints.” Equip is a rare word, which means, “to mend.” It’s used to refer to the repairing of a fishing net (Matthew 4:21), so that it can be used to catch fish again. Another image is of a physician setting a broken bone or dislocated joint. The essential idea is that leaders are to restore broken people so that they are useful to the Lord’s work. To disciple well is to equip (repair, mend) others so that they may engage in Christ’s work so the church, the Body of Christ, is strengthened. This is to continue until every individual in the church is mature

(“until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” Ephesians 4:13). In a few words, the goal of public discipleship is to help people in your congregation become like Christ (Romans 8:29). Christ Jesus said it himself: “it is enough for the disciple that he come like his teacher, and the slave like his master” (Matthew 10:25).

Nothing describes public discipleship better than *body life*. Perhaps that is why we are admonished to stir up one another to love and good works. How do we accomplish that goal? We must “not neglect to meet together” (Hebrews 10:25). It’s in the meeting together that discipleship happens as we love (John 13:34-35), encourage (1 Thessalonians 4:18), exhort (Hebrews 3:13), forgive (Colossians 3:13), confess (James 5:16), pray (James 5:16), sympathize (1 Peter 3:8), serve (Galatians 5:15), are patient (Ephesians 4:2), kind (Ephesians 4:32), bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), practice humility (1 Peter 5:5), and work for unity (Ephesians 4:3). It’s public disciple making that brings maturity to the body as a whole. As people participate in worship, sit under the preaching of God’s Word, engage in prayer, participate in community, give witness to their faith among family and friends, and fellowship together they grow.

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