

What Is a Disciple and How Do You Make One?

Tom walked up to John and said, “Will you disciple me?” John nearly keeled over. He felt overwhelmingly inadequate.

How would you react to this question? Would you have felt a surge of confidence? Or would you have felt a bit uneasy? Perhaps, like John, you would have been eager to say, “Yes,” but not quite sure about what saying, “Yes,” would actually mean.

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WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

First, what does it mean to be a disciple? In the Bible the word for disciple literally means “pupil” or “learner.” When applied to the early Christians, it came to mean someone who declared a personal allegiance to the teachings and person of Jesus. The life of a disciple revolves around Jesus.

Here’s a good working definition: A disciple is someone called to walk with Christ, equipped to live like Christ, and sent to work for Christ. Calling, equipping, sending. Let’s look at these three aspects of a disciple’s life.

A Disciple is Called to Walk With Christ

I grew up in a home that didn’t know Christ. We didn’t reject the gospel; we just never heard it. Area churches seemed focused on other things. In my early 20s, though, my soon-to-be wife, Pat, explained the gospel of Jesus to me, and I soon embraced Christ as my Lord and Savior.

There are 108,000,000 men in America 15 years of age and older. Regrettably, 66,000,000 of these men have made no profession of faith in Christ. That’s sad because many of them would gladly receive Christ if engaged in a credible way. What’s even sadder, though, is how many people think they have tried Christianity, found it wanting, and rejected it, when in fact they have never properly understood it.

First and foremost, a disciple is someone who has believed in Jesus—his life, work, death, and resurrection. The first task of making disciples is evangelism—to call people to walk with Christ by grace through faith.

A Disciple Is Equipped to Live Like Christ

Picture yourself as the president of a 100 person law firm. For years you have recruited lawyers, but then left them on their own. Without guidance and training they have done more harm than good. Unresolved cases have piled up, other law firms consider your firm an embarrassment, and the public thinks you are incompetent.

Suppose you go to your board of directors and ask to hire another 20 lawyers. They would say, “Are you nuts? You haven’t trained the lawyers we have. Why would we let you hire more? We have a terrible reputation. In fact, several young people who interned with us have quit the law. You’re fired!”

A lot of people who reject Christianity see Christians and say, “If that’s what it means to be a Christian, then I want no part of it.” Isn’t that a criticism too dangerous to leave unanswered? It may do more harm than good to invite a man to become a Christian if we have no plan to help him truly know and follow Christ.

When we don’t disciple (train and equip) a man who professes Christ, he will almost always become lukewarm in faith, worldly in behavior, and hypocritical in witness. The second task of making disciples is teaching—to equip them to live like Christ.

A Disciple Is Sent to Work For Christ

Why do we equip men and women to live like Christ? So they can enjoy Christ by knowing Him better, but also “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Jesus prayed, “Father, as you have sent me, so I am sending them” (John 20:21).

We have found that God’s people want to give their life to a cause, to make a difference, to do something with their life. When we disciple people properly, they will eventually want to make that difference for the glory of God: to “bear much fruit” and do “good works that will last” (John 15:8,16).

Once people have been with Christ, experienced the joy of His grace, the warmth of His love, the cleansing of His forgiveness, and the indwelling of His Spirit, they inevitably come to a point when they can no longer be happy unless they are serving the Lord.

Evangelism, teaching, service.... these are the “trinity” of making disciples. Now let’s look at some methods to actually make disciples.

HOW DO YOU MAKE ONE?

Many methods come to mind, but: The best method of making disciples is the one you will use. Which of these are most suitable for you?

Preaching and teaching

The age-old starting point for making disciples is the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. Don’t overlook or underestimate the power to make disciples from the pulpit. God has called some to be pastors and teachers “to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). Pastors, make sure your people walk out thinking, “Isn’t God awesome!”

Small groups

We recommend the book “*The Man in the Mirror*” as a starting place for discipling men. According to its author, Pat Morley, one man read it recently and accepted the challenge to start an accountability group. That group grew to eight men, then split into four groups. Two of the men approached the pastor to start a men’s ministry. After seven years, about 75 other groups exist with an estimated 900 men. Small groups for couples, men or women are a dynamic way to build disciples. What kinds of small groups are there?

- Bible studies
- Accountability groups
- Prayer groups
- Share groups
- Men only
- Couples
- Home groups
- Office groups

Most meaningful change takes place in the context of small group relationships. As we tell our “stories,” the truth of the gospel gets meaty and fleshy. Simply, people better understand the Gospel when they see it in a believer’s life!

Private study

Do your members lack power? Jesus said, “Your problem is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God” (Matthew 22:29). Christians become disciples when they discover God in His Word. Personally, I have never known a single man whose life has changed in any significant way apart from the regular study of God’s Word. Encourage your membership to read God’s Word. We recommend *The Daily Walk (Walk Through the Bible Publications)*. Use private study time to memorize meaningful verses, pray, sing, and meditate on God’s Word.

Christian literature

In 1656, Puritan Richard Baxter said, “See that in every family there are some useful moving books, beside the Bible. If they have none, persuade them to buy some: if they be not able to buy them, give them some if you can. If you are not able yourself, get some gentlemen, or other rich persons, that are ready to do good works, to do it.” We see it over and over...a man will get hold of a book, and God will use the book to get hold of the man. Give a guy a book!

Seminars and conferences

A man said, “Wow, that seminar changed my life!” This was quite discouraging to his pastor. He thought, That speaker didn’t say anything to my congregation members that I haven’t been saying for years! And he’s right! God can only reap through a seminar in proportion to what the pastor has sown through his weekly work. So, the seminar speaker reaps where another has sown. Both, then, should give all glory to God for what God has done (John 4:36). Seminars do change people’s lives.

How many people in your church are lukewarm? How many people in your church are bearing much fruit? It would be wise to answer these questions right now—and take action. You’re going to heaven, right? Why not take 30, 60, or 100 spiritually mature brothers and sisters with you (Matthew 13:23)?