

Discipleship in the Local Church

Contents

Introduction	1
Our mission	2
The centrality of Jesus	4
Skills for discipling	5
1. The skill of listening	5
2. The skill of asking questions	6
3. The skill of “feeling with” others	7
4. The skill of speaking the truth in love	7
5. The skill of referring	8
Prayer and discipleship	9
Discipleship and growth	10
Boundaries in discipleship	11
Conclusion	12
Suggestions for church leaders	13

Introduction

For the past few decades, conservative Anabaptists have founded a growing number of counseling centers to help believers who are struggling with personal and interpersonal problems. Many people have testified of the help they have received from their counselors. The trend does raise questions, however. Are people receiving help away from home that should be provided in the local church? Is the increase in counselors and counseling centers, even while meeting needs, also enabling a neglect of soul care among pastors and mature church members?



Writing team

Steven Brubaker (PA), Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblentz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), Marvin Wengerd (OH), and David Yoder (KS)

Clearly, counselors who are being paid to offer their services can give more concentrated help to people than those who try to help while working full-time in other occupations. Furthermore, through training and by their regular exposure to human problems, counselors develop significant understanding and experience in working with those problems.

But are we losing important aspects of congregational life in the process? Are members becoming less aware of the sorrows and problems of one another? Is there a decrease in the sense of responsibility for one another? Will this further weaken the bonds that ought to be developed through member care? And does this trend feed the mentality that one's spiritual condition is a private matter?

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize the work of counselors. We need them. Our goal is to call the church to take seriously the responsibility of member care as central to the mission Jesus gave us to make disciples—that is, to follow Jesus and help others to follow Jesus.

Our mission

On that memorable day when Jesus gathered His disciples on Mount Olivet, He gave them their marching orders:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).¹

In the English translation, the first word of the Great Commission is “Go,” which could make us assume that our mission is somewhere away from home. In the Greek, this verb indicates ongoing action—“going.” The imperative verb is actually the next verb, translated here as “make disciples.” It is the verb form of “disciple.”² As we go, we are to make disciples. That is, we are to help others to follow Jesus.

This involves “teaching them to observe” all the things Jesus commanded and taught.

This is the mission Jesus gave us.

We can assume that we will face many of the same challenges Jesus faced. Some people will respond favorably. Some will turn away. And some might follow for a time and then lose interest.

As we observe Jesus, we see Him teaching His disciples, showing them by example and then giving them responsibilities. We can assume our discipling involves the same methods and that it calls for the same kind of commitment, patience, and wisdom in the process.

Immediately after the Holy Spirit was given, the disciples took up this mission of making disciples.

1 All quotations are from the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

2 The NET Bible's textual note for Matthew 28:19 reads: “Go... baptize... teach” are participles modifying the imperative verb “make disciples.”

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47).

Several things stand out here. In addition to the teaching ministry of the apostles, they were fellowshiping, “breaking bread” together, praying, worshiping, and sharing their material means to fund the ongoing work.

We can immediately point out that this was a special situation. The large crowd was together for the Feast of Pentecost. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the believers from outlying areas apparently just stayed on, and the daily gathering continued. This group needed lodging and food, and the locals gave freely to make it happen. We know that this arrangement was temporary. Likely many of the new believers stayed in Jerusalem, got jobs, and found more permanent lodging until Saul's fierce persecution “scattered [them] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1).

But the point here is that the apostles were doing what Jesus had commissioned them to do—teaching believers how to follow Jesus.

Just as it took time and resources then, so it will today.

God does not leave us on our own for the mission He has given us. In pouring out His Holy Spirit on the church, He gives gifts to enable the members to carry out the mission. Paul describes these gifts as being, “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12, 13).

Some members are gifted with “word ministries” such as preaching, teaching, and encouraging, and others with “deed ministries” such as giving, helping, and hosting.³ Both are important for discipling. When God's Holy Spirit is working in us, every member has a part to play in enabling others to follow Jesus. In the experience of the early church mentioned above, the apostles were teaching, but others were providing lodging and meals.

Carrying out the mission Jesus gave us calls for everyone to share in the work.

3 In his book *Ministries of Mercy*, Tim Keller uses these terms, focusing on the power of “deed ministries” in our communities to exemplify Jesus, who was “mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19).

The centrality of Jesus

It may seem obvious that “making disciples” is focused on Jesus, but history shows that we easily allow issues, favorite doctrines, and strong personalities to become the rallying point of believers. Consider the identity names we carry: Baptist, Presbyterian, Holiness, Methodist, Anabaptist, Holdeman, Hutterite, Mennonite, Amish... Of course, we say our primary identity is Christian. But we must not overlook the danger of focusing more on helping people to follow us than helping people to follow Jesus.

Paul rebuked the Corinthians for this very thing. “Each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ’” (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul called them back from these sectarian quarrels because they detracted from the centrality of Jesus among believers. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (v. 13). Perhaps we are too far down the denominational road to rectify all the damage, but discipleship is still the same venture: Our mission is to enable believers to follow Jesus.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them of his focus when he first came among them: “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

We must encounter Jesus Himself before we are able to think about following Him and learning His ways. Discipleship is first about a Person, and only secondarily about values and behaviors and solving life’s problems.

This is a point often overlooked. We rightly understand that helping others to follow Jesus involves “teaching them”—studying what He taught and applying it to our current circumstances and problems. But those who would follow Jesus must first be enraptured with Him. When we have fallen on our faces before Him in worship, we are prepared to follow Him. Those who love Him, Jesus told His disciples, are the ones who will delight in keeping His commandments (see John 14:15).

As Samuel Whitefield writes, “God does not want a people who follow His Son because they feel guilty and obligated. He is forming a people who love His Son more deeply and consider Him a greater treasure than any other treasure.”⁴

Jesus Himself transforms us, as demonstrated in Paul’s ministry at Corinth. Corinth was a seacoast town known for its wicked residents, including fornicators, idolators, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, and extortioners (Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10). But Paul goes on to say, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (v. 11).

4 Samuel Whitefield, *Discipleship Begins with Beholding*, p. 34. Whitefield’s premise is that we become like what we worship; that is, what we delight in, desire, and love with all our hearts.

Since we know that Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), we can trust that if we disciple people today as Paul did at Corinth, lives will be transformed from habits of sin to living like Jesus.

The most fundamental element of discipleship is regular and sustained exposure to Jesus. In his second letter to the Corinthian believers, Paul wrote, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). We become like what we worship. If we want to become like Jesus (which is the goal of following Him), we must regularly “behold” Him, worship Him, delight in Him, and express our love for Him. Spending time with Jesus purifies our desires, corrects our thinking, lifts our spirits, and illuminates our understanding.

We do this both personally and collectively. Like Jesus, we have our times alone with God, and we assemble also with fellow believers to be fed, encouraged, strengthened, and nourished by His presence. By talking about Jesus, sharing with each other what Jesus is saying to us, testifying about what He has done and is doing in our lives, and expressing our delight in His Person we enable one another to follow Him more faithfully.

Skills for discipling

As we participate in helping others to follow Jesus, certain skills are very helpful. But before we consider those skills, we need to recognize their place. Both believers and unbelievers can develop skills in speaking, listening, diplomacy, mediation, and other interpersonal abilities. The church, unlike earthly organizations, is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and we must guard against the tendency to rely on our own abilities for this work. But with Jesus’ active presence among us, it is right to “stir up” our gifts and to exercise and develop our skills for the mission we have been given.

We will consider five skills that are helpful in discipling others, and we will observe that Jesus is our perfect example in using these skills.

1. The skill of listening

James, the brother of Jesus, writes, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:19, 20). James is pushing against several common tendencies in communication—our tendency not to listen well, our tendency to speak before fully understanding another person, and our tendency to grow angry and make a mess of things when we disagree.

The human yearning to be understood runs deep. It increases when we disagree with someone or when we are distressed.

Life often presents us with problems, trials, hardships, and losses. A significant part of helping one another to follow Jesus is listening as people talk about their struggles. Bonhoeffer writes,

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us

His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.”⁵

As fellow believers share their struggles, we need to listen attentively, taking the time to let them find words to express their struggles and making sure we understand what they are thinking and feeling. Sometimes, listening is all a person needs. There may be nothing to “fix”—the person is in a situation he or she just needs to accept, and having someone understand is what gives the courage to do that. Other times, attentive listening enables a wise response. When a fellow believer is assured that we have understood, he or she is more likely to hear what we have to say.

2. The skill of asking questions.

Closely associated with listening is the skill of asking questions. A good listener, seeking to understand another person, will ask questions that enable the person to better put into words what he or she is trying to express.

Jesus was a master at asking questions. He sometimes responded to a question with a question. He often used a question to make a point and perhaps to soften the point He was making. There were times when He asked a question to allow the person to discover truth. And other times, He simply gave opportunity for the person to verbalize something.

Consider Jesus’ intention in asking each of the following questions:

- “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (Matthew 8:26).
- “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?” (Matthew 12:11).
- “Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep?” (v. 12).
- “Have you understood all these things?” (Matthew 13:51).
- “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matthew 16:13).
- “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 14).
- “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Clearly, asking questions was an important part of Jesus’ discipling ministry. It should be no less a part of our own discipling.

Questions show respect for another person’s thinking ability and enable them to participate in the learning process. We tend to understand an idea we articulate ourselves better than one simply given to us by someone else. Furthermore, we tend to follow a plan or course of action that we have come up with better than one told to us by someone else. Certainly, people need to be told things in some situations, even told what they ought to do. But for believers who want to

5 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*, Harper & Roe Publishers, Inc., New York, 1954, p. 97

follow Jesus, asking them what they think or what they ought to do is a way to allow God's Spirit to work in their own heart.

3. The skill of “feeling with” others

Not only is it helpful to listen well when people are going through difficult circumstances and ask pertinent questions, but we help them by feeling with them. This was an important part of Jesus' earthly ministry, and the writer to the Hebrews assures us that Jesus continues to feel with the struggles of His people.

We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness (Hebrews 4:15–5:2).

The Greek verb translated “sympathize” means to be affected by the same feeling as another. By coming into our world, Jesus became “acquainted with grief.” He knows by experience what it is like to be hungry and thirsty, to be mocked and scorned, to be rejected, to experience betrayal, and to suffer pain. Thus, Jesus can feel with us in our own sorrows, and He can faithfully represent our needs to the Father.

Many times in Jesus' earthly ministry we are told that He was “moved with compassion.” When He saw people in desperate circumstances—blindness, sickness, mourning, and spiritual ignorance—He allowed His heart to feel their distresses. He not only relieved their circumstances, but He did so with concern and kindness, sometimes with tears in His eyes.

Jesus is our example. Human sorrow is no less today than in Jesus' time. As we see people in distress, and particularly as we see followers of Jesus in distress, we can serve them by feeling their sadness, their desperation, their unease, and their pain with them. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul instructed that “members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:25, 26).

4. The skill of speaking truth in love

Exercising the skills of listening, asking questions, and empathizing with those around us prepares us to speak into people's lives effectively.

Words are powerful. The old proverb says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). Harsh words, slander, put-downs, gossip, lying, and vulgar language coming from the mouths of Christians do damage to the name of Jesus and can cause fellow believers to stumble. In contrast, words of encouragement, comfort, insight, gratitude, and kind correction are essential for helping each other to follow Jesus.

In the first sixteen verses of Ephesians 4, Paul offers guidance for healthy growth in the church. An integral part of that is “speaking the truth in love” (v. 15). Words of truth are life-giving words because they align with Jesus Himself and move us to become like Him. Truth needs to be guided by love, however, which means it needs to be spoken for the good of the person, with kindness and gentleness, and appropriate for the person’s circumstances and spiritual maturity. This takes discernment, sensitivity, and much love.

Writing to Timothy, a young pastor, Paul advised, “A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

Speaking to unbelievers, we must take care to stay within the bounds of loving communication as we speak the truth, especially when they do not, so we do not leave an ugly mark on Christ’s name. If they are disrespectful or if they misrepresent us, we must not retaliate in kind.

Even in speaking to believers, we may be tempted to resort to forceful words, harsh judgments, or disrespectful language, especially if a person is immature and resistant. We must carefully discern what words the person needs (if any) to better follow Jesus. Jesus was a master at saying the right things to the right people at the right time and for the right reasons.

5. The skill of referring

Discipling is a work that can and should include all the members in some way. Each member has his or her own gift(s), and these gifts are given for serving each other. No one has all the gifts. As we help others to follow Jesus, it should be normal for us to refer them at times to other members in the church who can assist with specific needs.

If a woman is struggling in a difficult marriage, for example, and seeks help from a pastor’s wife, that wife might know of another person in the church who has needed to deal with similar relationship struggles. Referring the struggling woman to a person who has had a similar experience is a wise use of the resources God has given to the church.

So, we must not assume that if we are helping another person walk with Jesus that we are the only one to help that person. We might be offering great encouragement for a person who is discouraged, but if the discouragement involves his or her finances, there may be another person in the church who is better equipped to offer financial guidance.

Paul urged Titus to guide the older men to teach the younger men and the older women to teach the younger women (see Titus 2). No doubt Titus himself disciplined younger believers, but we can assume that, following Paul’s advice, he also referred younger believers to interact with specific older believers, making wise use of the experience, maturity, and gifts of the older members.

Older women can be a great service to younger women, helping them to do well with the challenges of domestic life (see Titus 2:4). But in addition, older believers both male and female, can help younger believers with struggles like making decisions, relating to the opposite gender,

deepening in Bible study and prayer, resisting sexual temptation, relating to difficult people, sharing our faith with unbelievers, and deepening in acquaintance with God.

As we walk with one another, we need to keep in mind that we are whole beings—spirit, soul, and body. Our physiology and our spirituality are intertwined. As we help people to follow Jesus, there may be times when we should guide them to see a doctor. Struggles with confused thinking, continued down feelings, insomnia, or panic attacks may be indicators of an underlying physical problem. Brain tumors, hypothyroidism, and hormonal changes can affect thinking and emotion. Prolonged stress leads to over-production of hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol, creating adverse effects both physiologically and emotionally.

When there is a diagnosis of a physiological problem, however, we must not assume that all the person needs is a doctor's care. He or she still needs fellow believers for support and soul care. A mother's struggle with post-partum depression, for example, is not "solved" with medication. She still may need people to help with baby care, and she certainly can be comforted and strengthened by those who listen, empathize, and pray with her.

Prayer and discipleship

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus spent much time in prayer. We don't have record of most of His actual prayers, but we have two significant windows into how Jesus prayed for His followers, both near the close of His earthly ministry.

Luke records the first prayer. Jesus had introduced the communion in His body and blood and had told His disciples that one of them would betray Him. He had also quoted the Prophet Zechariah about the Shepherd being struck and the sheep scattering, telling them that they all would forsake Him. They all protested that they would not forsake Him. This is the setting for Jesus' next words:

"Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31, 32).

Jesus knew that His disciples would soon face severe testing. He knew they would all stumble and that consequently, they would struggle with shame, confusion, and deep distress. This knowledge informed His prayer. He prayed that their faith would not fail.

In times of intense struggle and failure, we can lose sight of God. Our faith can grow weak. We can begin to doubt God, question His ways, and develop misconceptions about His care, His goodness, or His faithfulness to His promises.

Jesus' example informs how we help each other through difficult times. We need to pray for each other and with each other. And we need to especially pray that our faith will not fail.

The second example of Jesus praying for His followers is found in John 17. John records Jesus giving wonderful consolation and guidance ahead of this prayer, again in the context of knowing His disciples would face tremendous struggles. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (14:1). Jesus assured them of the help of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit,

and He urged them to “abide” (to remain and stay put) in Him. Then we have His powerful prayer of intercession. Included in His prayer are the following requests:

- That the Father would keep them, especially keep them from the evil one, vv. 11, 15
- That they would be sanctified by truth, v. 17
- That they would be united, vv. 21-23
- That their oneness would testify to the world and glorify the Father, vv. 22, 23
- That they would be faithful and one day be with Him and see His glory, v. 24

What a beautiful example of how we can pray for those we are helping to follow Jesus! We need to pray for specific needs they have in their struggles. We need to pray for their protection from sin and Satan and the world. And we need to pray that they can keep the larger picture in focus—being one with fellow believers, leaving a powerful testimony to the world, bringing glory to God, and persevering to the end.

Given Jesus’ example in prayer, it is no wonder that when thousands came to faith at Pentecost, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Discipleship and growth

As we follow Jesus, the goal is to become more and more like Him. The New Testament writers describe this as growth like the growth of our bodies. We begin as “babies in Christ” and move on to become spiritual adults. Many verses describe this growth process, warn against stagnation, explore the blessings of spiritual growth, and describe the responsibilities of those who are more mature.

Just as older ones in a home care for the younger ones, so it is in the church. The Apostle John refers to different stages of development as little children, young men, and fathers (see 1 John 2:12-14).

“Little children,” or infant believers, need a lot of attention and guidance. Like physical infants, they are vulnerable to eating what is unhealthy or dangerous. As they begin to walk with Jesus, they more easily stumble and fall. And they can be distracted, lose interest, or grow weary. They also are not ready for the weightier matters of our faith but need the “milk of the word” (1 Peter 2:2).

“Young men,” like biological adolescents, have a lot of energy and often have fresh vision. They can be idealistic and may be eager to take on projects and responsibilities they are not adequately prepared for. Adolescents are vulnerable to disillusionment when their ideals hit reality. They can become critical and discouraged. They need older ones to walk with them, listen well to them, temper their wilder ideas without discouraging them, and harness their strength and enthusiasm.

“Fathers,” or mature believers, are able to provide stability for the church. Leaders are chosen from the spiritual adults. As they grow older, like the biological elderly, they are vulnerable to nostalgia and hanging on to the past. They can descend into cynicism and grumpiness as they

see younger ones growing up and taking on new ventures. Older believers can offer invaluable wisdom, however, both to the personal lives of members as well as to the group as a whole. Many functions of the church depend on the maturity of spiritual adults—leadership (1 Timothy 3:6), restoration of the erring (Galatians 6:1), mediation (1 Corinthians 6:1-5), and discernment (Hebrews 5:12-14).

A congregation needs members in all phases of spiritual growth. It is helpful for each member to interact regularly and meaningfully with those who are spiritually younger, with spiritual peers, and with those who are spiritually more mature. This allows for a healthy balance of input and output.

As mentioned earlier, the analogy to biological development breaks down. Young believers, even just after coming to Jesus, may offer insights and perspectives under the direction of the Holy Spirit that bless and edify older believers. And while leaders and spiritually mature believers can take a role similar to the parental role in a family, all believers are “children” of God.

Boundaries in discipleship

In pursuing our mission to “make disciples” of Jesus, we need to avoid the trap of trying to do more than is ours to do or of responding to every request of people around us.

Observing Jesus, we can see that people were constantly tugging on Him for help. He sometimes said no to requests. At times He withdrew from the crowds for personal refreshment. We see Him always staying within the boundaries of His calling and the boundaries of truth and righteousness. And He taught His disciples to do the same.

To a man who wanted Jesus to help him in a dispute with his brother, Jesus said, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” (Luke 12:14).

To a Canaanite woman who wanted Jesus to come heal her daughter, Jesus said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). Jesus had gone to this region apparently to get relief from the crowds (see Mark 7:24), and though He didn’t go to the woman’s house as she requested, because of her persistent faith, He did heal her daughter.

After Jesus fed the five thousand with a lad’s lunch, the people “were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king.” In response, Jesus “departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” (John 6:15).

Around this same time, the disciples were so busy they didn’t even have time to eat, and Jesus told them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (Mark 6:30).

At one point, the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus because He was on His way to Jerusalem. Indignant at this rebuff, James and John asked if they could command fire to consume the Samaritans. Jesus rebuked them, saying, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of” (Luke 9:55).

All these incidents show Jesus setting boundaries on His discipling ministry. He didn’t do everything anyone asked. He took time for refreshment. He limited His ministry to the ones His Father had called Him to. And He didn’t resort to harmful methods in response to insult.

As we engage in helping others to follow Jesus, we must observe similar boundaries. Discipling can be demanding. Young or burdened believers may make demands on our time or attention that are beyond what is healthy for the relationship. People may ask pastors to provide services the pastor is not equipped to provide or that would distract from his true calling. (For a biblical example of this, see Acts 6:1-4.)

Paul gave the following guidance to Timothy as a young pastor: “Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity” (1 Timothy 5:1, 2). As a young man, Timothy was called to respect those who were older. He was also to observe purity boundaries in relating to young women.

The wisdom of purity boundaries is clearly shown by the tragic stories of pastors falling into sexual sin. This doesn’t mean that men can’t help women to follow Jesus or vice versa. Aquila and Priscilla disciplined Apollos, who went on to be a great blessing to many other believers (see Acts 18:24-28). We need to set boundaries in our cross-gender interactions that keep the relationships healthy. Note, for example, that Aquila and Priscilla worked as a team in discipling Apollos.

Our boundaries ought not to be so restrictive that they prevent healthy cross-gender interaction. At one point in Jesus’ ministry, a woman who was identified only as “a sinner” washed His feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with fragrant oil. Simon, the Pharisee in whose house this happened, was aghast. But Jesus saw and commended the woman’s penitence, her love, and her faith. He forgave her sins, assured her that her faith had saved her, and sent her away in peace (see Luke 7:36-50). Note that this took place in a setting with others present and that the woman had no ill intentions.

Conclusion

Jesus has called us to follow Him. He has commissioned His people to help others to follow Him. This includes bringing others to faith in Him, baptizing them, and then teaching them what it means to follow Him. Disciple-making is a work focused on learning to know Jesus, delighting in Him, testifying to one another what He has done, and enabling each other through life’s difficulties. The Father has poured out His Holy Spirit on the church, giving gifts of teaching, helping, discerning, organizing, and serving so that every member can be part of the mission to help others know and follow Jesus. Another way of saying this is that every believer should have others who are more like Jesus as a result of their interaction.

God’s people need to rise to the challenge of helping each other become more like Jesus for His glory. How will you respond to this challenge?

Suggestions for church leaders

It is easier to describe what discipleship ought to look like in the local church than to flesh it out. The following suggestions may be helpful. Keep in mind that the main focus must be on a deep delight in who Jesus is and a desire to know Him. Leaders need to live in deep and authentic relationship with Jesus themselves to inspire the same in their congregations.

1. Preach a series of messages on who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. For example: choose one of the Gospels and trace how Jesus is introduced and revealed through the Gospel. How do you see people following Jesus, and how do you see Him discipling them?
2. From the book of Acts, preach a series on how discipleship happened in the early church.
3. Conduct a series of members' meetings to discuss discipleship. Explore needs—are there particular issues where your younger members need guidance? (Voluntary service, recreation, sexuality, dating, social media, music, etc.) What guidance do older members need for discipling younger ones. Together explore methods, meeting schedules, and resources.
4. Some churches have organized one-on-one mentoring relationships, pairing older members with younger members. Generally, they have found that this works better when it is voluntary rather than assigned and when there is helpful guidance given to clarify purpose and offer suggestions for how to make these meetings meaningful.
5. Assign a pastor or mature member to teach a class of young believers for a Sunday school quarter (or a Wednesday evening series) on following Jesus. Material could be taken from the Gospels and organized around individuals who met and followed Jesus (or met and turned away from Him). This would include the twelve disciples, of course, but also people like Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, the demon possessed man from Gadara, the seventy whom Jesus sent out, Mary and Martha, etc.) This could be even more personal if it were divided by gender—an older man teaching young men and an older woman teaching young women.
6. Organize a Sunday school quarter or a Wednesday evening series for adults to study from the Gospels how Jesus disciplined those who followed Him.
7. Read books about following Jesus:

Anabaptist authors

Charting a Course in Your Youth by Gary Miller
Doing What Comes Spiritually by John Drescher
Journey Towards Holiness by Alan Kreider
Journey Into Jesus by John Coblenz (or
Journey Into God by the same author)

Evangelical authors

These may have some perspectives that do not align with Anabaptist understanding, but also many perspectives we share.
The Complete Book of Discipleship by Bill Hull
The Pursuit of God by A. W. Tozer
The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Discipleship Begins with Beholding
 by Samuel Whitefield

This paper was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues.

We welcome your response.

Write us at contact@anabaptistviewpoint.org

or send a letter to:

ViewPoint

28527 Guys Mills Rd

Guys Mills, PA 16327

Church leaders, subscribe by sending an email or a letter, or visit anabaptistviewpoint.org.

ViewPoint builds on the Anabaptist value of community wisdom. A team comprised primarily of older, ordained men forms the core executive group. Subcommittees are then formed to address particular issues, drawing in people experienced in the subject.

ViewPoint was formed in response to repeated calls for help in addressing issues facing conservative Anabaptist leaders. A number of church leaders asked Faith Builders (Guys Mills) to facilitate the effort. The ViewPoint executive committee includes Steven Brubaker (PA), Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblentz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), Marvin Wengerd (OH), and David Yoder (KS).

Materials produced by ViewPoint are intended to assist and encourage church leaders, not to dictate or control them. Leaders are free to use the uncopyrighted materials as best suits their needs.

ViewPoint is funded by contributors who wish to help equip conservative Anabaptist church leaders. You may send contributions to Faith Builders, 28527 Guys Mills Rd., Guys Mills, PA 16327. You may also give online at fbep.org/giving. Choose “Where Most Needed” and write “ViewPoint” in the comment line.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.