

Why Standard Discipleship Training Falls Short

When teaching Christian formation, we often contrast it with the dominant forms of discipleship training commonly taught over the last hundred years or so. This contrast is necessary, in part, in order to highlight the limitations of the usual approaches and to help listeners consider another way of growing spiritually. Many common assumptions about how the Christian life works are fairly defective, yet they are so heavily integrated into Western Christianity that unless we deconstruct some of these myths surrounding spiritual growth, it is very difficult for people to even hear what spiritual formation is about. Familiar terms like *grace*, *relationship with God*, and *growth* have been misused so much, they no longer have the same meanings they had when Jesus and Paul taught about Kingdom living. These problems make it really hard to present a different way of engaging with God. In order to help those who are new to Christian formation to grasp the enormity of this shift, we have to draw some comparisons between formation and the kinds of discipleship they are more familiar with.

Unfortunately, what some people take away from this is that we are down-playing the importance of things like Bible study and good ethical behavior. Many people have benefited greatly from the dominant teaching style and consequently object to the strong contrasts we are making. In an effort to clear up any misunderstanding before we dig into this a little deeper, please allow me to make something very clear. *We strongly support good Bible study, mission trips, getting involved in church, and doing what is right even when we do not feel like it. Especially in the face of a growing Biblical illiteracy in our culture, a basic education in Christian principles is an essential part of our spiritual development.*

The Great Omission*

The problems with discipleship training that we are addressing actually go far deeper than just the material involved and the activities that are encouraged. You see, whenever you teach values-laden subject matter, what you leave out of your curriculum not only speaks very loudly, it also shapes the way you teach and what the students take away from their training. For example, when you have an entire course on prayer and teach everything you can about Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (the well-known ACTS acronym) and then go on to the next topic in your discipleship course, you have created *an enormously distorted idea of prayer* even though everything you said was basically true. Because when you leave out the part about listening to God and learning to hear His voice, you are effectively teaching the student that God is a non-relational God. He may *act* on your behalf, but He does not *interact* with you personally. He does not talk to His children and there is nothing for us to say about hearing His voice.

This, in a nutshell, is what is wrong with common approaches to discipleship. Virtually all the training is about what we can do, how we should do those things, and why we should be motivated to do them. The great underlying assumption is that God has left us on our own to see how well we will do with the commandments He has given us, and that He will come back some day to judge us for our performance. Oh, we forgot – the Holy Spirit helps us somehow, but not really in any way that we may be consciously aware of. We are just

supposed to take it as a matter of faith.

This is what we mean when we say that most discipleship training distorts the Christian life. Yes, we need to study the Bible. Traditional approaches to Bible study have much to recommend them. But when the unspoken assumption is that we can actually do what the Bible says to do if we just try hard enough, then whatever good that the Bible information may have done is offset by the lie that it is up to us to live it out by sheer willpower. Or take another example. Although we do not see very many seminars anymore on *How to Know God's Will for Your Life*, at one time these were very popular. Whenever they were offered, there was standing room only. But nearly every one of these lectures came down to the same three principles. If you want to know if something is God's will, you should (1) make sure it lines up with Scripture; (2) seek the advice of your friends; and (3) see if there are any confirming circumstances. Now apart from the fact that there are serious difficulties with all three of those suggestions, did you notice what is missing? There is not a single word about hearing God's perspective on the matter. What happened to asking God to mentor us regarding the situation to see what aspects we might have overlooked or how He sees things differently than us? More importantly, why are we being taught *how to try to figure out* what God wants us to know, without ever asking Him to tell us Himself? Again, this not only distorts what it means to know God's will; it greatly distorts what it means to be in relationship with God and how God might be involved in our lives.

These are not trivial distinctions. They make all the difference between learning how to live a life of *grace* (building a relationship with God so He can do in us and for us what we cannot do for ourselves) and a life of *legalism* (trying to live up to an external standard). To defend these discipleship models on the basis that they teach us how to study the Word, truly misses the point. Because without the broader context of engaging with God for life, we are left with a truncated form of discipleship that communicates a highly performance-based approach to life that bears a very strong resemblance to behavior modification dressed up in theological terminology. We see this same problem presented by a truncated form of the gospel that is very common today, one in which people are told that they can choose between going to heaven and going to hell if they will simply agree with God's version of history. But Jesus never taught that. His invitation was to become a follower, however flawed we might be in the process. And as soon as you divorce salvation from following, you distort both of them and you turn the gospel into a transaction instead of a relationship.

Fowler's Stages of Faith

Given all of the above, one might still argue as Fowler did that people go through various stages in developing a meaningful spiritual life. According to this theory of spiritual development, people must learn concrete rules about how life works before they can move on to a nuanced understanding of life that relies more on an internal compass than on external rules. An analogy can be drawn to that of raising children. As a child emerges from infancy, good parents will set some fairly strong boundaries and rules to bring order into the child's life and to train them how to be considerate and relational. Then as they get older, the child is given more freedom and greater responsibility for their own behavior until at last they are ready to be emancipated and go out on their own. This is all well and good.

But let's consider another possibility. What if the child is being raised by parents who never reached adult maturity themselves? What if the adults are still running their lives on the basis of rigid rules and do not know how to teach their children discernment? At that point, the context for teaching is so severely limited that the child's world will be distorted. In a healthy environment a child can see differences between child maturity and adult maturity, and thus internalize a sense of earned freedom and responsibility. But in a dysfunctional home a child may never learn that perspective and instead achieve their freedom through deception or force. Only when the parents have progressed beyond a rule-based life can they properly teach rules to their children. The larger context is critical.

In the same way, when religious leaders are trapped in a performance-based paradigm themselves (due to the training they also received), and have not learned how to develop a relationship with God that transforms them from the inside out (i.e. Christian Formation), then they cannot help but teach discipleship out of their own highly performance-oriented experience and understanding of the Christian life. As such, their teaching is truncated, and the students are trained in distorted views of God and distorted approaches to life, without ever being shown what it means to move beyond a paradigm of self-effort. So while we would agree that new Christians need to be taught some rudimentary elements of the Christian life, this teaching must be done from the broader context of Christian formation in order to be free of the legalistic tendencies that are so common in Western churches.

Conclusions

To put this another way, *the primary approaches to discipleship most of us are familiar with simply cannot stand on their own merits*. Without the larger context of a formational and relational approach to the Christian life, these training methods will eventually foster either legalism, self-righteousness, disillusionment, burnout, or some combination of the above – regardless of how much truth is communicated in the process. But once we begin engaging in conversational prayer with God and discovering the life that comes from Him speaking into our mind and heart, then we can revisit all of these things that need to be taught new Christians and reframe them in ways that are consistent with the larger goal of building a functional relationship with God. At that point we will have a discipleship program that breathes life into the students rather than simply challenge them to try hard to do all the things Jesus commanded us (which are impossible unless we are being changed from the inside out).

Finally, no one who is serious about their faith really wants to settle for a fraction of what God has for them. If the Western church is going to survive this century, it will need to rediscover what it means to build a relationship with God that is vibrant enough to transform our heart and mind. Our people will need to learn how to discern the voice of God and how to interact with Him so that He can feed their soul, heal their wounds, and mentor them in their life. These are just a few of the reasons why we have to be very vocal about the limitations in the common forms of discipleship that we were all brought up on.

* I borrowed the phrase "The Great Omission" from Dallas Willard