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**A Biblical Theology and Strategy for Discipleship**

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**A Theology of Gospel-Centered and Biblically Sound Discipleship**

**Definition of a Disciple and Discipleship**

A good definition is needed for any discussion. So, what do we mean by ‘a disciple’? If the definition is too long, it will defeat the very purpose of setting a definition because it will cause even more unnecessary arguments. Therefore I don’t think Wilkins’ 30-word definition is good because it involves a few other concepts which may also need to be defined before a serious discussion, i.e. ‘eternal life’, ‘claimed’, ‘Savior’, and ‘following Jesus’.

I will simply define ‘a disciple of Jesus’ as a ‘learner of Jesus’. However, I understand that there are true disciples as well as false disciples. It was written in John 8:31: “So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine”. Jesus did not bother redefining ‘a disciple’. He simply said those who continued to practice His teachings are ‘true disciples’. So, I decide to use Jesus’ strategy to make things simple.

Of all the discipleship strategies we have assessed in class, I have not seen any of them successfully demonstrating how to conceive ‘discipleship’ as something different from ‘making disciples’. So, I decide to define ‘discipleship’ as ‘making disciples’ so as to make things simple. After all, we do not have the term ‘discipleship’ in the Bible.

**A Striking Fact Regarding the Term ‘Disciple’**

The term ‘disciple’ has been used almost 400 times in the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. Surprisingly the word ‘disciple’ does not show up even one single time in all the letters to the churches or individual saints of Jesus Christ.

I believe it is not difficult to see that the four Gospels as well as the Book of Acts have been written with an important purpose that the world may believe in Jesus Christ with certainty. (John 20:31, Luke 1:4) In other words, compared with the letters to churches and individual saints, these books have assumed a much bigger role of speaking to the world. ‘Making disciples’ is a concept that may help the world understand what is going on with the Jesus’ movement. John the Baptizer had his disciples; the Pharisees had their disciples; and Socrates had his disciples, just like many masters nowadays have their disciples too. The world understands what Jesus meant when he told His ‘disciples’ to go and ‘make disciples’ in all nations.

**Doing Discipleship without Focusing Only on the Term ‘Disciple’**

The Bible is the ultimate authority of our faith. Therefore, a gospel-centered discipleship must be biblically sound. The fact that the word ‘disciple’ does not show up a single time in all the letters to churches and saints deserves our attention. When people ask us what we are doing in church, we can answer them saying something like ‘we have discipleship programs for learning to be like Jesus’. However, when we are interacting with one another and making disciples in church, we must use more of the biblical terms used in the letters written to churches.

‘Disciple’ is the term for us to communicate with the world. It is also the term that we Christians start our journey with. However, the journey which Christians embark on is actually so much different from any kinds of discipleship happening in the world that the term ‘disciple’ is no longer sufficient for our use. As a matter of fact, focusing only on the word ‘disciple’ will cause us to stray off from the gospel. I believe this is one of the reasons why many other terms emerged in the N.T. letters. Among these terms are ‘believers’ (highlighting faith), ‘saints’ (highlighting holiness/separation), ‘servants’ (highlighting lordship), ‘children of God’ (highlighting regeneration), ‘heavenly citizens’ (highlighting the Kingdom), ‘members of body’ (highlighting interdependence and oneness in the Spirit) and ‘brothers/sisters’ (highlighting God’s family). How we address each other is important. Every time we call somebody in a certain way we communicate a certain truth. It is not difficult to see that using the above biblical terms to address each other within the church can help strengthen the gospel messages. On the contrary, focusing only on the term ‘disciple’ during the ‘whole’ process of discipleship is biblically ‘unsound’. The absence of the word ‘disciple’ in the N.T. letters does not mean that they stopped doing discipleship. On the contrary, it means that ‘discipleship is not just a limited program within the church (but) the life of the church.’ (Wilkins p.299)

When we are interacting with one another and making disciples in church, we should, I believe, use more of the title ‘brother/sister’ to call each other. The frequency of occurrences of the term ‘brother(s)’ in the whole N.T. is about 600 times, evenly distributed across the whole N.T.

**Doing Discipleship Based on the Mid-Term Evaluation From Jesus**

I was very active in church in Hong Kong in the 70’s. There was a time when church memberships all over Hong Kong were dwindling. I clearly remember how the concept of discipleship was shipped into many churches as a ‘package of professional performance evaluation and recommendation’. The general message we got from the discipleship movement was that the decline in church memberships was the result of a lack of a good discipleship strategy. Usually a recommended discipleship strategy was a combination of neatly organized materials and management skills that seemed to be supported by individual verses taken (‘ripped’ probably a more accurate description) from scriptural texts. Different churches adopted different discipleship programs and began to grow in numbers. Not long though, some leaders began to question whether or not the discipleship programs had been leading the churches in a wrong direction.

Jesus has commanded the Church to make disciples. I believe if we want to know how well we have been doing the job so as to adjust our strategies, we need to look at the mid-term evaluation from Jesus. Jesus has already told the Apostle John to write letters to seven local churches to deliver His mid-term evaluation (Rev. 1-3). These comments should form the single most important document in guiding our direction of making disciples. Surprisingly, Jesus did not say a word to blame the churches for their lack of a discipleship strategy. Yes, some churches failed and Jesus blamed them, but all for reasons other than a lack of strategy.

The guiding principles for making disciples based on the mid-term comments from Jesus:

1. The church as a whole and the messenger (leaders) in particular being primarily responsible: Praises and reproaches were directed against the whole church as well as the one who taught and lead the disciples of Jesus (1:20).
2. Guarding the church against false teachings: Many churches failed because they failed to identify or stop false teachings which blurred the line between holiness and impurities (2:2, 2:6, 2:9, 2:14-15, 2:20, 2:24, 3:9).
3. Stressing the love for God and brotherly love as the core teachings: Jesus taught the disciples loving God and loving each other as the greatest commandment, He also addressed this teaching in His mid-term comments (2:4 & 19).
4. Stressing spiritual abundance instead of worldly prosperity: Jesus commended as ‘rich’ one church which was poor in a worldly standard (2:9) and described as ‘poor’ another church which was rich in a worldly standard (3:17).
5. Stressing perseverance in the obedience of the Word of God in the face of adversities: The only two local churches which were given an A+ were The Church of Smyrna and The Church of Philadelphia. The meanings of names of these two churches (i.e. bitter/suffering and brotherly love) may have given us a glimpse of their performances that earned for them an A+.

**Making Disciples of Jesus with the Understanding that the Body of Christ is Jesus**

Much has been said about imitating Jesus through taking part in mentoring programs in many discipleship strategies. There are two main problems pertaining to this: (1) there is a huge difference between Jesus and any one of us; (2) Jesus is no longer physically present among us. Therefore, a biblically sound way of doing discipleship must take into consideration the truth that for the time being the ‘Body of Christ’ is Jesus before the second coming of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 12:27, Eph. 5:23).

The Body of Christ is not just a gathering of disciples but an organization with different members interacting with one another like different organs of a human body according to the different gifts distributed by the Spirit (Eph. 4:11-16, Romans 12:3-8).

Therefore, making disciples of Jesus must be done through bringing people to the Body of Christ and assimilating them into the Body of Christ. With such an understanding, we can say that ‘how to manage a church properly’ should be the key factor in any discipleship program. The term ‘church’ appears in the N.T. 106 times (2 times in the four Gospels, 16 in the Book of Acts and 86 times in all the other letters to churches and saints). A good evangelical discipleship program must be in line with the ideas of ‘running a true church’ as rediscovered by the greatest protestant theologians. As our church is a Presbyterian church, a ‘true church’ according to Calvin’s understanding must properly preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments of baptism and the communion, and discipline disobedient members. As regards the proper government of a church, obviously the authority and responsibility fall on the shoulder of a board of ordained teaching and governing elders. Michael Horton, the author of The Gospel Commission, will definitely agree with me on this point.

**Avoiding An Explicit Strategy to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples**

Many discipleship programs have emphasized that it is crucial to include an explicit mechanism in making disciples who make disciples. It has given Christians an impression that all Christians should be conscious of the huge responsibility of making disciples who make disciples. They most heavily based their argument on one single verse, 2 Tim. 2:2. I believe they have read too much into the verse. I believe this particular verse may speak strongly to the elders of the church who are aware of their grave responsibility in making sure that church leadership will continue to be strong.

As regards making disciples or the growth of the church, I believe the seeding parable of Jesus (Matt. 13:1-23) has already made it very clear that as long as the Word of God is preached; the hearers understand it; the environment is right; and the hearers do what the Word says, they will bear fruit. The discipleship presentation by our guest Michael also highlighted this point. ‘The church grew,’ he said, ‘very slowly … Basically the pastor just faithfully preached the Word of God and lived it out.’

I don’t think an explicit mechanism should be the key. It does not mean that the church is lazy or not smart enough to come up with a mechanism. It does mean that we believe in the power of life. When God told Adam and Eve to bear fruit and multiply, they did not worry about if there was any mechanism to multiply. They simply continued to obey the Word of God to love each other and take good care of the garden. They multiplied. On the other hand, it also means that we are aware of the danger of putting in place a humanly designed mechanism of multiplication which will more likely produce fake fruit bringing impurities to the church.

**Our Strategy for Discipleship**

**No Single Strategy Is Suitable for All Churches**

We all know that there is no single strategy of discipleship that is suitable for all churches as regards the feasibility of implementation in the hope of achieving the long term goal of spiritual formation. Therefore, the strategy I am going to outline is just a strategy that our church is using, as well as developing right now.

Therefore, before I go on, I will first give a list of facts regarding our church:

1. We are a Chinese Presbyterian Church with a Congregation of around 50 regular attendees in the SE Woodstock neighborhood.
2. All members are Chinese. Half of the congregation is long time faithful members while half of them are either newly converted or regularly attending younger couples with minors attending elementary schools.
3. We have materials prescribed by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church for training leaders, preparing people for baptism/confirmation as well as the Westminster’s Catechism.
4. I have been helping in this church for 4 years and have created the following Chinese materials: (1) 70 MP3 audio sermons (30 minutes each): One half preaches the gospel from the Four Gospels and another half preaches the gospel from the other books of the Bible, with the target audience set as new disciples; (2) 130 one-page articles: One third of them introduces the gospel and two thirds of them applies the scripture to everyday life issues.

**All Regular Attendees of the Sunday Sermons Are Considered Disciples**

‘Expository preaching’ is the core part of our strategy. It is different from textual preaching and topical preaching. Textual preaching is a short scriptural text followed by a long lecture of systematic theology without expounding the text. Topical preaching is organizing sermons according to a series of topics which lack scriptural originality, and then hunting around for verses to support pre-established content, e.g. point 1, 2, 3 …etc. An ‘expository sermon’ is faithful to the Word of God. In other words, it is faithful to the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scripture. Being faithful to the scripture means that we do not hijack part of the text and then move on to say what we want to say. Instead, we pay much respect to the structure, thoughts, context and feature of the text, trying to identify the messages in the text that the author and the Spirit intended to convey. When we do that, we truly preach with the authority of the Bible. We take the Jesus’ mid-term evaluation seriously and guard against false teaching and preaching.

We consider all those who come ‘regularly’ to these expository sermons the ‘disciples of Jesus Christ’. We often remind them of that saying, ‘We come here every week to learn to be like Jesus. We are the disciples of Jesus Christ.’ We preach to all brothers and sisters for the building up of the Body of Christ but the messages are all gospel-centered and we will explain terms that new disciples may not be familiar with.

Remarks: That’s why I chose to define ‘a disciple of Jesus’ as ‘a learner of Jesus’. I hope that all of them will become true disciples eventually. I will encourage them also to listen to our MP3 sermons and read our Biblical articles online. Like the ‘Anatomy of A Disciple’, I put the MP3 sermons and Biblical articles on the internet. This part of our strategy can also be considered as a ‘selection’ process. We normally will not spend much time working on those who are not interested in our expository gospel-centered sermons. It does not mean that we do not actively reaching out. Brothers and sisters have been taught to practice the teaching of Jesus in their families, work places and their neighborhood, and encourage people to come and be the disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Inviting Attendees to Stay for Lunch after Sermon**

All sermon attendees are invited to stay for lunch. All baptized ‘brothers and sisters’ will come forward and take the communion before going to serve the other participants. Brothers and sisters normally sit with those they have invited to have some fellowship with them. Usually all will receive sufficient personal attention.

Remarks: This step can also be considered as part of the ‘selection’ process because those who never stay for lunch are probably not ready for joining the Body of Christ. As we believe the ‘Body of Christ’ is Jesus according to the N.T. theology, true disciples will choose to hang out with the ‘Body of Christ’. This is also an excellent way of teaching the essence of the gospel through the communion (sin, forgiveness, holiness) and the service (loving God and loving each other) of the brothers and sisters.

**Inviting Attendees to Attend the Open Discussion after Lunch**

All participants are invited to attend the Open Discussion after lunch. Participants are encouraged to ask questions about Jesus’ teachings and free discussion is allowed. Remarks: We allow free interaction and do not use brain-washing materials. We follow the footsteps of Jesus and maximize true learning through Q & A. This is also an important part of ‘selection’ because we can identify active learners and invite them to go through baptism counseling/faith confirmation class.

**Inviting Motivated Disciples to Go Through a 7-Session Faith Confirmation Class**

The motivated disciples/learners will go through a 1-on-1 or a small group faith confirmation class based on a curriculum prescribed by the PCUSA. The last two chapters will help the learners to identify their gifts (using an inventory provided), get them ready to contribute to the Body of Christ after baptism, and also have them sign a covenant stating that they will obey the teachings of Jesus, be a witness to others and bring others to the Body of Christ.

Remarks: This process allows more ‘association’ between the responsible ‘elder’ and his/her ‘disciples’. This is also the final stage of ‘reproducing’ a born-again Christian, adding a brother/sister to the congregation.

**Inviting Brothers/Sisters to Saturday Catechism Classes and Much More**

All brothers and sisters are invited to attend the Saturday Catechism Classes in which the elders will consciously identify teachable brothers and sisters who have shown perseverance in loving others and brought people to the Body of Christ. The elders will invite them to serve in different committees according to their gifts. Elders will use the EPC leadership training materials to train them and mentor them. When they pass the training, they will be ordained Deacons/Deaconesses. Mature Deacons/Deaconesses will be ordained ruling or teaching Elders by the Session of Elders. The maturity of brothers and sisters will be assessed with reference to the Profile of a Discipled Person Attached below.

Remarks: We do not think that every believer needs to be overwhelmed with the consciousness of ‘making disciples who make disciples’. We stress that all believers have to live out the teachings of Jesus (loving God and people) in their everyday life and bring people to the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is multi-gifted, and is able to minister to different individuals’ needs. However, the elders are aware of their grave responsibility in training a ‘Timothy’ who can train another ‘Timothy’ to teach and govern the Body of Christ. In this section, we can see the critical processes of ‘selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision and reproduction’.

**Profile of a Discipled Person**

**A: Affective Descriptor; B: Behavioral Descriptor;** **C:Cognitive Descriptor;**

**A #1 Feels sad about his/her past sinful life and expresses desire for changes**

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17)

**A #2 Loves to spend time alone with Jesus, talking with Him and reading the Scripture as His Word**

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.—MATT. 10:37

**A #3 Feels that the Word of God, the Scripture, is becoming the essential ingredients of his/her thoughts**

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.—JOHN 15:4

**A#4 Shows signs for joy when sharing with others the glorious hope of his/her faith**

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.—LUKE 10:19-20

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.—MATT. 13:44

**A #5 Feels at peace when people around him/her does not pay much attention to him/her**

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.—MATT. 18:3-4

**A #6 Feels happy when someone sincerely feels sorry for sinning**

There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. – Luke 45: 10

**A#7 Often feels sorry that he/she cares for himself/herself more than people around him/her**

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. - ROMANS 13:8

**A #8 Desires to come to the communion to renew the commitment to building up the body of Christ by serving one another in love**

And Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”—LUKE 22:15-20

**B #1 Regularly Seeks Spiritual Food From God’s Word**

MATT. 11:28 Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”—JOHN 7:37 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger.”

**B #2 Often genuinely says words like ‘I believe God will bring me through this’ in the face of challenges**

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.—JOHN 14:1

[ Jesus] said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”—JOHN 20:27

**B #3 Asks fellow Christians to pray for him/her to stay on top of certain temptations**

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.—MATT. 10:28

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. – 1 John 5:16

**B #4 Keeps praying for things that are clearly in line with scriptural teachings**

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.—LUKE 18:1

If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (1 John 5:14)

**B#5 Prays to God for peace when feeling anxious about the necessities of daily life**

Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?—MATT. 6:25

**B #6 Does not let himself/herself say whatever he/she wants out of anger to hurt others**

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.—MATT. 5:21-22

**B #7 Often prays and asks God to check his/her attitude and expose any harbored wickedness in him/her**

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.—MATT. 23:27-28

**B #8 Does not stock up wealth here on earth but gives generously to the people in need**

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.—MATT. 6:19-21

**B #9 Does not try to exaggerate things in his/her speech**

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil.—MATT. 5:33-37

**B #10 Constantly prays that God will empower the Body of Christ with His Word so that more people will become His disciples**

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.—MATT. 28:18-20

**C #1 Knows that he/she has been born again**

Jesus answered . . . “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”—JOHN 3:5, 7 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”—JOHN 3:3

**C #2 Knows the scriptural basis for his/her attitude, behavior and work**

But (Jesus) answered, ‘It is written …’ … Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written …’ … the Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written …’ (Matt. 4:1-11)

**C#3 Knows specifically what it means for him/her to deny himself/herself to follow Jesus**

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.—MATT. 16:24-25

**C #4 Knows that every time he/she is obedient to the truth in his/her spirit, he/she is truly worshipping God**

The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.—JOHN 4:23-24

**C #5 Knows that God will teach him/her how to respond to those people who try to challenge our faith**

You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.—MATT. 10:18-19

**C#6 Knows that it is always possible that there may be something wrong with his/her understanding which causes her/him to judge people wrongly.**

First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.—MATT. 7:5

**C #7 Knows exactly how to pray for and treat those who are not nice to him/her in ways that show his/her genuine love**

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.—MATT. 5:44

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.—LUKE 6:27-28

**C#8 Understands that God requires His children to honor the covenant with Him and with our spouse.**

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.—MARK 10:11-12