

Ordinary, Everyday Discipleship¹

Life Groups are the primary organizing structure of Joy Community Fellowship. By that we mean that the primary way we experience what it means to be the Church is through Life Groups. They are the primary way we organize ourselves for carrying out the mission of Jesus, which is to be discipled and to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

We're drawn towards structuring Joy Community Fellowship around our Life Groups because of what we see modeled in the New Testament about the characteristics of an environment of discipleship. What is discipleship?

Discipleship is the holistic care of a small group of people who are consistently experiencing Jesus' life and teaching together in an environment where they are learning to submit every area of life to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

What follows are ten features of culture of discipleship, which is what we long to see our church family experience together, so that we might grow more and more into the image of Jesus.

1. Empowered by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:5-14, Galatians 5:16ff, John 15:5, Acts 1:8)

This is very liberating, because it reminds us that the mission of disciple-making does not ultimately depend on us. Only the Holy Spirit can change hearts and transform lives. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us like Jesus and enables us to accomplish the good works that we have been created and redeemed to walk out. The Holy Spirit calls, equips, teaches, reminds, convicts, leads, reveals, comforts and counsels so that we might bring glory to God in all things as disciples of Jesus.

That is why before Jesus sent out the disciples to carry out their disciple-making mission, He told them to wait for power from on high (Acts 1:8, John 20:21-22, Luke 24:46ff). Making disciples must be done in submission to and in partnership with the Holy Spirit. He is the primary discipler and equipper of people, and we must constantly ask Him to show us what is next for us and for those we disciple. We can do nothing apart from Him: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

What would it look like to do disciple in submission to and in partnership with the Holy Spirit?

¹ Adapted from Soma Communities', Creating the Environment for Discipleship, <http://www.gcmcollective.org/article/creating-the-environment-for-discipleship/>

What negative effects would result from not discipling in submission to and partnership with the Holy Spirit?

2. Gospel-Saturated (Colossians 1:6, Ephesians 4:15-16, Galatians 2:14, 2 Peter 1:3-9)

A disciple is someone who is learning to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. But Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands" (John 14:21). And we love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). And His love is most clearly, vividly, beautifully revealed in the gospel. So the gospel is the motivation to bring absolutely every area of life under the Lordship of Jesus. We must be deeply convinced of how good and gracious Jesus is for us to find submission to His lordship as good news. So as the gospel seeps into every crack and crevice of our lives, we will walk more and more in submission to Jesus as His disciples.

Can you apply the gospel to your own life? In the lives of others? Do our casual conversations often (or ever!) move towards the gospel?

3. Community-Influenced (Ephesians 4:15-16, Colossians 3:12-17, John 13:34-35)

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). So one of the key ways our discipleship is evidenced is through our relationships with others. Love requires community, and since love is the defining mark of a disciple, then discipleship requires community. Jesus did not just disciple one-on-one; He called twelve, and it was quite a blend of characters! It was almost unavoidable that they would have conflict. But Jesus applied the gospel to His disciples' lives in the midst of their conflict (Matthew 20:20ff).

Being in relationship with others creates a "rub" that exposes our unbelief in the gospel (Ephesians 4:15-16). The church is God's family, and part of being in a family is that you've got to deal with people pushing your buttons. And God is using those people -- the difficult, annoying, sinful people -- to go to work on your heart. It's as if we're a bunch of little rocks that God has put into a bag, and He's shaking us up so that we collide with each other. Sometimes sparks fly, but through the ministry of the gospel in those hard times, God is making you into a beautiful, smooth gemstone. But, sadly, we often leave those relationships, rather than grow in them, when we experience friction.

Are you in a web of relationships within the church which are so intimate and transparent that you are seeing one another's "gospel needs"?

4. Missional (Luke 8:1, Matthew 9:9-13, 15:21ff, John 4)

"Missional" is an evangelical buzzword these days, but it just means a people who are committed in all of life to the mission of making disciples. And your going and making disciples is part of your discipleship: "Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. ***And the twelve were with him,***" (Luke 8:1) Jesus did missionary work with the twelve, and their being with Him was a part of His forming them as His disciples. He did not sit them in the classroom and take them through a Masters of Divinity program, and then tell them they were ready to go out and make a disciple. They were trained on the job.

In Matthew 15 you see Jesus in "missionary" work with a Canaanite woman, but you can see He is also teaching the disciples too. While reaching out to the lost, Jesus is also equipping His disciples to reach the lost. This is the same experience we have as we go on short-term missions trips. Often the people who go come back saying, "I was far more blessed than those I ministered to."

Jesus was consistently exposing the disciples to different kinds of people and in different kinds of places, people and places that the Pharisees were very uncomfortable with. Many of those people were physically, relationally, emotionally or spiritually needy. But it's in serving such people that love, compassion, servanthood, sacrifice and generosity are integrated into a person's life. You can't teach those fruits of discipleship in a classroom.

When does discipleship start? At the point of contact/relationship, or conversion?

5. Holistic (Matthew 5:3-12, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 1:18, 3:17, Titus 2:10)

It's obvious from reading the four gospels that Jesus was not only concerned with equipping His disciples with head knowledge. From His teaching and His life, it's clear that He was committed to developing them holistically; that is, with helping them bring their whole lives under the rule and reign of His heavenly Father. That is the mark of a disciple: someone who is learning to apply the gospel to absolutely every area of life.

Discipleship is caring for the whole life of a person, not just the "spiritual" areas of a person's life like Bible reading, prayer, etc. A person's time, job, money, relationships, body image, leisure, etc. must all be shaped from a gospel perspective. Even our eating and drinking is to be done with a view towards God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). So discipleship involves the spiritual nurture and care of people with regard to "head (knowing sound doctrine), heart (having that doctrine shape and transform our hearts) and hands (being able to serve and equip and help others to grow in Christ)".

Do you see discipleship as pertaining only to the area of "church/ministry"? Or are you engaging in every activity of life with the mindset of a disciple of Jesus?

6. Frequent & Long Term (Mark 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Acts 2:46, Hebrews 3:12-13)

When Jesus chose the twelve we're told that "He appointed twelve so that *they might be with Him...*" (Mark 3:14). He would teach them, and He would send them out, but first they were just going to do life with Him. Jesus spent three years with those disciples, and during those three years they must have spent an incredible number of hours together.

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." His charge to Timothy was to entrust to faithful men who would be able to teach others what he had heard from Paul (2 Timothy 2:2). How would he know their faithfulness? By seeing it walked out in their lives!

Discipleship is not fast. It's not a nine week course you can rush people through on Sunday mornings. It takes a lot of time, commitment and sacrifice. A disciple must be with those who he is discipling frequently and must care for them over the long-term, in order to see whether they are really *faithfully* bringing the gospel to bear on life.

Should we expect anything less? The call to be Christ's disciple is a call to die (Luke 9:23)! But too often we want to engage in "leftover discipleship", giving it the scraps of extra time we can afford. Yet Paul's example is, "¹⁵I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Corinthians 12:15). This is the heart of a disciple-making disciple.

Is it truly possible to disciple someone with the 2-3 hours per week that are spent together in most "discipling" relationships? How much time do you think it should take?

7. Experiential (Matthew 20:20ff, Luke 14, John 13:1ff, Luke 7:37ff)

While Jesus did spend time in the temple formally instructing His followers, much of the time He spent with His disciples was not in the formal environment of a classroom or synagogue, but in a more experiential, "ordinary life" sort of environment. Jesus taught people "along the way" (cf. Deuteronomy 6:6-7). They were living together, traveling together, eating meals together, serving the needs of others together.

The Great Commission is not just about teaching people, but teaching people *to obey*. And since people obey the commands of Jesus in life, not in a classroom or worship service, much of the discipleship process happens in the ordinary experiences of everyday life. To maximize the discipleship process, we need to be living closely with them outside of church gatherings, engaging in ordinary life with gospel intentionality.

This does not mean you need to add a bunch of new things to your life. It's choosing to live differently, bringing people into ordinary life (sharing meals, going to the grocery store, running to the bank or post office), and doing so with gospel intentionality. You

eat 21 meals in a week; what if you shared three or four with brothers and sisters in Christ (or those not yet in the family of God) for the sake of intentional discipleship?

How can you live and experience more of life together with other believers in a given week or month?

8. Individually Tailored (John 3-4, 11, Jude 22-23, 1 Thessalonians 5:14)

Think of how differently Jesus ministered to Nicodemus and the woman at the well, or Mary and Martha after Lazarus' death. Though He spent a great deal of time with the disciples as a group, we also see Him specifically speaking into the lives of individual disciples at different times and in different ways. As Paul says, "Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Every person has different needs, shaping influences, problems, passions, pasts, spiritual gifts. And so each person must be viewed individually, in the same way that parents view the development of each of their children individually. There is no cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all discipleship plan that will work the same for all people. While there is a "deposit" of truth that is the same for all, we need the leading of the Holy Spirit to identify needs and see effective ways to minister to each person.

How can you make sure that you are giving regular and personal care to those you are discipling based on their needs and personality?

9. Modeled (John 13:12-17, Philippians 4:9, Acts 20:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, 1 Timothy 4:12)

Though at times Jesus did teach the disciples in more formal settings, it was His consistent example of love, servanthood, sacrifice and generosity that presumably left a great impact on the lives of His disciples, as they watched His life and followed His example (1 Peter 2:21). It's one thing to hear a sermon on forgiveness, but it's another thing to see a husband and wife have a conflict and then watch them resolve it biblically.

How can you model as much of a Christ-like lifestyle as possible to those around you?

10. Expectation of Multiplication (Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Timothy 2:2, Acts 11:18ff, 13:1-3)

It's woven into the very fabric of creation that healthy things reproduce. Biologically, the reason we age is that cells slow down in reproducing and eventually stop reproducing, which leads to deterioration and decay of the body. And it was Jesus' strategy from the beginning that His disciples would be the foundation for the multiplication of disciples of Jesus around the world. It would be a very odd parent who didn't have a vision for their kids to grow up and move out and start new families!

There is sadness in this, but joy in knowing that when a kernel of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24). As disciples teach others to obey everything that Jesus has commanded, that includes His command to make disciples. So the goal of multiplication should be the stated and expected goal from the beginning. Not every person may be a gifted leader, but every Christian is spiritually gifted and called to be a disciple-maker (starting first and foremost, in our homes, with our spouses and children) as part of some form of gospel-centered community on mission.

Do you see yourself as a disciple-maker, even if you aren't considered a leader? How can you cast vision to those around you to become disciple-makers in the next 1-3 years?

All this can be overwhelming, and becoming this sort of gospel-shaped community is a lifelong endeavor. But we take comfort in knowing that in Christ, there is no condemnation! We are not made right with God by our zeal for or effectiveness in disciple-making, but through the blood and righteousness of Jesus. Yet when we see the wealth of His love for us, love for Him will be awakened in us, and we will *want* to obey His commands, including the command to make disciples (see 2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

If you want to motivate someone to learn how to build a boat, first impart to them a love for the sea. Because if they love the sea, they will do anything to figure out how to build a boat! These ten marks of a discipleship environment give some form and structure that we hope educate on how to "build the boat" of a discipleship environment. But we never want to forget that it is only love for Jesus, birthed out of His great love for us, that will compel us to abandon all for the sake of His disciple-making mission.