

I planted a tree. No particular reason. I wasn't observing Arbor Day, practicing eco-conservation, or any such thing like that. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I re-planted a tree. I found a small pine seedling in an obscure corner of our backyard and decided to transplant the seedling to a wide-open space smack in the middle of the grassy portion of our yard. Nurturing this little pine seedling became my personal project during the spring and summer of my 16<sup>th</sup> year of life. I watered it every day during the heat of that first summer; I put a protective fence around it to make sure my future tree didn't experience premature death by lawnmower. Amazingly, the little seedling grew! By the time summer was turning the corner into fall it was obvious, even to my untrained eye, this little tree was going to survive & thrive. In fact, after a couple of years, my mom started in with subtle suggestions that, seeing as how my tree was in the middle of the grassiest portion of our backyard, I might want to get rid of the tree before it got too much bigger. I overlooked her sly suggestions; I had too much invested in that pine tree. Our family eventually moved to a different house and I had to leave my tree behind. But sometimes, when I'm back in the Golden Isles visiting, I'll ride over to our old house and check on my tree. The last time I checked, my tree was still booming, towering over and dominating a backyard that now has very little in the way of grass but is abundantly blessed with massive amounts of pinecones and pine straw.

I've shared this deeply personal (and touching) story with you for the purpose of illustrating the major gist of this article. I believe Scripture clearly demonstrates there are three foundational purposes to which the church needs to devote its energy and resources: worship, evangelism (reaching lost people w/the Gospel of Jesus), and discipleship (nurturing new believers into spiritual maturity); discipling new Christians is indubitably the most challenging of these three foundational pillars. If honest, most churches would admit that discipling is the one area that is greatly lacking in their overall ministry strategy. Right now you should be asking yourself, "Self, why do churches struggle to effectively disciple newborn Christians?" Allow me to offer an answer that will also clarify the reason for my "boy and his tree" story.

The main reason so little discipling gets done is because of the cost and I am not referring to monetary expense. The crucial investment in discipling involves time – that oh so precious commodity that seems to be in such short supply these days. My experience with the pine seedling illustrates beautifully the method of discipling a new believer. Discipling occurs when an established, maturing believer chooses to spend time with a newborn believer to ensure that the new Christian gets a healthy start in his or her spiritual development. Discipling a Christian seedling means being an encourager, an instructor, a prayer partner, a friend, and a role model. Discipling is a process that takes time. Consider this: Jesus – the consummate disciple maker - invested three years in the process of discipling His apostles in order to ready them for their future ministry.

I had no experience, formal training or basic clue about how to successfully transplant a pine seedling. You don't need special training to disciple a newborn believer; you mostly need a heart that desires to see newborn Christians grow to maturity and a willingness to invest the requisite time to nurture and protect them until their faith roots are deep enough to sustain spiritual vitality. Don't think of discipling as a church program; understand discipling as intentional relationships within the Body. Look around. Do you see a young believer trying to establish his or her spiritual roots? Reach out... invest in that person...disciple them. Grace & peace, love you. PK