

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING

“When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles” (Luke 6:13).

When a pastor looks out over his congregation on Sunday morning, what does he see? Many things. He sees some non-Christians perhaps, some seeking, some curious, and some who have been brought to church by concerned friends. He sees people with heavy hearts crushed with sorrow, people on whom the pressures, disappointments, and heartaches of life have fallen.

He sees young Christians, who are eager and thrilled with their new lives in Christ. He sees “old” Christians, who have heard it all before and who respond to the most stirring challenge with a hearty yawn. He sees the faithful, who are there every time the doors open.

He sees the newly married. He sees those whose marriages are in trouble. He sees families with financial problems, hospital bills, and businesses that are not doing well. He sees the successful businessman. He sees the husband who has lost his job and the farmer whose crops must have rain soon or he will lose everything. And so on around the congregation.

As the pastor stands there before his people, a thought crosses his mind, *How can I minister to these people and meet their needs with a message or two a week?* The congregation probably has as many needs as there are people in it. What is the answer to his dilemma?

To answer his question, we must first ask, "Did Jesus ever face anything like that? Did He have crowds before Him with a variety of needs?" The Gospels clearly indicate that He did. His ministry was filled with miracles, multitudes, long hours, weariness, and spiritual conflicts. Lepers came who needed His touch; blind men called His name as He passed by. Lawyers tried to trick Him. Sinners of all kinds and of both sexes loved Him, provided Him with meals, and washed His feet with their tears. Cheering throngs followed Him; crowds later demanded His death. His life was filled with every type of emotion, every type of opposition, every type of activity.

Toward the end of His ministry Jesus spoke with His Father in His great high priestly prayer—interceding for His disciples. In it He made a startling statement, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

Why is that so remarkable? Didn't Jesus glorify God with every thought, word, and deed every moment of every day of His life among men? Yes He did, and that is amazing in light of our own failures along these lines. But the truly astounding thing is His statement, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (KJV).

Most of us are familiar with Christ's work of redemption and remember His words from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). By that final and glorious act, He purchased our redemption; He died for our sins; He set us free.

What then did He mean in His prayer when He said, "I have finished the work"? When you read the prayer carefully, you'll notice that He did not mention miracles or multitudes, but forty times He referred to the men whom God had given Him out of the world. *These men were His work.* His ministry touched thousands, but He trained twelve men. He gave His life on the cross for millions, but during the three and a half years of His ministry He gave His life uniquely to twelve men.

In our teaching and preaching we often clearly emphasize Christ's ministry of redemption, and we certainly should do that. But we also need to study, understand, and proclaim His ministry of training in the lives of these few men. Three principles may be seen in this training.

The Principle of Selection

The men whom Jesus chose were ordinary people—fishermen, tax collectors, and others like them. When it came time to choose those whom He would train, He spent the night in prayer. "One of those days Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles" (Luke 6:12-13).

This is an important point in selection. He did not hastily rush out and grab the first people who showed interest. To Him this was a momentous decision that would have far-reaching consequences. How far reaching? Humanly speaking, we can't even guess, but we do know this. The consequences of that ministry have continued to this day and by the grace of God will continue through our lives into the lives of thousands in the years to come.

Whoever is thinking about or is now involved in a ministry of making disciples (Matt. 28:19) should think soberly about this matter of selection. It is much easier to ask a man to come with you than to ask him to leave if you learn, much to your chagrin and sorrow, that you have chosen the wrong man.

Why did Jesus choose men with very human tendencies and failings? Suppose He had chosen only those who were highly cultured, of great intellect and wealth, who never had any nagging doubts or fears, men who never made mistakes or said things they later regretted, those who were strangers to the infirmities, desires, problems, and sins of the rest of us. Where would that put us? We couldn't identify with people like that. We would be tempted to throw up our hands in despair, turn around, and continue in our mediocre ways.

Not only were they common men, they were individuals. They were not all alike, twelve photocopies of each other. They were not twelve wooden soldiers carved from the same diagram, twelve cardboard replicas cut from the same pattern, twelve plastic statues taken from the same mold. For example, Simon the Zealot hated the Romans who occupied Palestine, while Matthew the tax collector worked for them.

What does that teach us? What application to our lives can we draw? One lesson is obvious. In our making disciples, we

should not select only those who are like us in temperament and personality. Nor should we choose only those who act in a certain way that we find agreeable to our personal lives and acceptance standards. It would be a good idea to have some "roughnecks" on the team as well as some scholars and quiet types.

The work of Christ is a many-splendored thing, and there are times when the man who is rough and ready will be more fit for a particular task than the philosophical theorist and vice versa. God loves variety. In nature you'll find the wild rose, the blue spruce, the palm tree, the cactus, the magnolia, and the sunflower. At the zoo you'll marvel at the giraffe, hippo, gazelle, boa constrictor, hummingbird, and eagle. In selecting men and women, you'll have to abandon your proneness to conformity and follow the example of Jesus.

His men were called Galileans; they were people who were considered a bit provincial and old fashioned by their more sophisticated brothers in Jerusalem. They were generally a hard-working lot when compared to the philosophical dreamers and scholars of the big city. They did not already know it all, so they were more teachable than the cultured class whose home was Jerusalem. This is not to say that Jesus shunned men of culture and education. He had a lengthy conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council and a teacher in Israel; He did later choose Saul of Tarsus to be one of His leaders in the church.

The Principle of Association

For what purpose did Jesus choose the twelve apostles? "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14).

Jesus chose these men to be *with* Him. This was not a revolutionary idea in His day, for there are numerous instances in the Old Testament where men were trained for the work of God by association with other men of God.

God had the prophet Elijah choose Elisha to help him and carry on after he was gone. Elijah did not find him in the schools of the prophets, studying and meditating, but in the field working (1 Kings 19:15-16,19). The disciples also were

called from their daily work to go to be with Jesus (Matt. 4:18-22; 9:9).

Elijah did not beg Elisha to go with him, or use his prophetic office to force him against his will into the ministry. Every person must count the cost and enter into discipleship training willingly. In fact, from the record of their discussion, it appears that Elijah was perfectly willing to let Elisha bow out if he wanted to. If he was to collaborate with him, he must learn from him voluntarily (1 Kings 19:19-21).

It cost Elisha something to follow Elijah. With the evil Queen Jezebel on the rampage in Israel, the northern kingdom, these were, no doubt, uncertain times for the prophet of God and anyone associated with him. Had Elisha consulted with flesh and blood, he would have undoubtedly received counsel to stay with his oxen in the field; it was far safer and much more lucrative.

But Elisha was aware of the tremendous spiritual enrichment that would be his if he spent time with the mighty prophet of God. So after he made the break and killed his oxen, his means of livelihood—a final act of total commitment—and went with Elijah (1 Kings 19:21), what did he find himself doing? Serving Elijah. It is true that those who would lead must first learn to serve. And it is equally true that to train men a person must be willing to spend time with those men in hours of conversation and association in the normal affairs of life.

That is one reason why you cannot take on too many men at once. You can spread yourself too thin and never get any quality time with any of them. You only have so much emotional reserve, so you are limited in the number of men you can train by the hours in a day and the spiritual and emotional capacity of your own life. A common mistake is to try to do too much, too quickly, and with too many.

We learn from the association of these two men that Elijah never urged Elisha to continue with him in the work. Quite the contrary. On three occasions Elijah encouraged Elisha to reevaluate their relationship and leave if he wanted to, but three times Elisha refused. Elijah had made the right choice. At Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho Elisha was given the opportunity to quit, but he chose to stay by Elijah's side (2 Kings 2:1-6).

When Elisha decided to follow Elijah and minister to him, it was a decision that stuck. He had counted the cost and determined that this was for him. So in your choice of men and subsequent association with them in the ministry, it is imperative that you allow those men to get the mind of God on the matter, to know exactly what's involved, and to realize that your getting together is not primarily for *your* benefit but for theirs.

The association of Moses and Joshua is another illustration of this point. God had given Joshua to Moses in answer to Moses' prayer and one of the first things Moses did was put some of his honor on Joshua (Num. 27:15-20). That's an important point. I have talked with men who were afraid to train other men as spiritual leaders in the congregation for fear of losing some of the loyalty or respect of the people. They enjoyed being the center of attention; they enjoyed the feeling of having the people dependent on them and them alone. Moses shared his authority with Joshua.

As we watch Moses in this context, we notice that he found his security in God. He rejoiced to see Joshua begin to carry some of the load. In their association, Joshua was there to help Moses in the ministry and carry on after he was gone. He succeeded to the leadership some years later. "Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, 'Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel'" (Josh. 1:1-2).

The Old Testament gives ample evidence that on-the-job training was not a new idea in Jesus' day. When Jesus approached the twelve disciples with the idea, they knew what it was all about and rejoiced at the opportunity. They had no idea of *all* that would be involved, but no doubt were delighted and honored to be chosen. Later, as Christianity developed under their leadership, the procedure was continued.

Peter had men with him when he went to the home of Cornelius at the invitation of the men whom the centurion had sent. "The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house" (Acts 11:12).

Later the apostle Paul carried on this ministry of training by association. "He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and from the province of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus" (Acts 20:4).

When he wrote his last letter to Timothy, Paul reminded him of some of the things he had endeavored to impart. "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance" (2 Tim. 3:10).

The effect this ministry of making disciples by association has on the men in training is powerful, dramatic, and life changing. It is almost unbelievable to see the transformation that took place in the lives of the twelve apostles. It is one of the most spectacular miracles in Scripture. To watch them go from the humble shores of Galilee to the sophisticated center of Jerusalem and more than hold their own with the most august assembly Jerusalem could produce is a wonder to behold.

The Old Testament records an equally amazing phenomenon. David watched as a rag-tag, discouraged, discontented band of men joined themselves to him and he became a captain over them. After a short time they began to change. In their association with David and their serving under him, they became the truly great men of their day. Some of David's spirit rubbed off on them.

They were transformed into brave, heroic warriors whose exploits are legend. The Bible tells us, "Now these are the heads of the mighty men whom David had, who gave him strong support in his kingdom, together with all Israel, to make him king, according to the word of the Lord concerning Israel" (1 Chron. 11:10). The rest of that chapter records the exploits of these strong, valiant, courageous men. The change that came into their lives as they held strongly with David in his kingdom is nothing short of miraculous.

Every pastor has in his congregation men who today are merely spectators in the kingdom of God, but who would pay any price to be involved with him in the real heart of the ministry. But it will cost *him*. Such men need his sermons and instruction, but he will have to share his life with them. And that costs. The apostle John said, "This is how we know what

love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

Is it worth it? What are the dividends of this kind of ministry?

Jesus ordained twelve men that they should be in association with Him and that He might send them forth to preach. He had two things in mind in the training of the Twelve. One, that they would be of help to Him then and there in carrying out His mission. Two, that they would carry on after He was gone.

He would send them forth to preach to the high council of the Jews, to the philosophers of Athens, to the worshipers of idols, to the wild barbarians, to Roman soldiers—to anyone and everyone who would listen. He knew His training had to be in depth because these men would face formidable opposition. They would be stoned in the streets, beaten badly, and thrown into prison. So their preparation was vital. Shallow training and halfhearted commitment would not stand the test. They were saved to save others, but it would be a rough and rocky road most of the way.

The Principle of Instruction

In addition to His making His men His disciples by being with them in the everyday work of the ministry, Jesus also had special times of instruction with them. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables" (Mark 4:11).

And they knew what they were in for. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. But be on your guards against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles" (Matt. 10:16-18).

They knew it was not going to be as easy as an outing in the park. Jesus prepared them to face opposition and rejection. "If any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them" (Mark 6:11).

It is well that men do not enter discipleship training with their heads in the clouds. It is interesting to note that when Jesus chose Paul, He gave him a glimpse through Ananias of what was waiting for him down the road. Speaking to Ananias for transmission to Paul, Jesus said, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

When you are training potential disciples and workers, let them in on some of the trials and tribulations of the ministry that you have faced. Talk to them about some of the times you were rejected while witnessing in the neighborhood. Tell them about the cost of discipleship.

Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators, used to take a few of us aside and tell us about his defeats as well as his victories. But he was also careful to help us see that the mighty hand of God was always there to see us through. A verse he delighted to share with us was, "'No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me,' declares the Lord" (Isa. 54:17).

Jesus told His men, "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 15:16).

His training was out where the battle raged. Occasionally He would take His men aside for some special times together, but His training was mostly "on the job." They were in the ministry with Him. John looked back with awe and wonder at what he had experienced. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:1-2).

Jesus was available to His men. The Eternal Word became audible, visible, and touchable. They were close to Him. They were chosen to be with Him, but always for the grand purpose of preparing them for their ministry. He designed His training

so that their lives should bring forth lasting fruit. He did not prepare them to go out to a life of secluded fellowship with one another, so He did not prepare them in a secluded fellowship.

I have made mistakes in this regard. I have tried to train men by gathering them together in a quiet basement once a week to discuss the Christian life and then supplement this with occasional seminars or special meetings. It didn't work. But men who have ministered with me in the push and shove of life, out where we face victory and defeat daily, out in the world of real living, are today productive for Christ. I have watched them bear fruit that remains.

In summary, three things are a must for the person who would help others become stalwart, loyal, productive disciples in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

1. He must have clearly in mind what he wants them to know and understand of the things of God; he must know what are the basic ingredients in a life of discipleship.

2. He must have a clear picture of what he wants these disciples to become. He must know what bedrock elements of Christian character must be theirs and what kind of people they should be.

3. He must have a vivid vision of what he wants them to learn to do and a workable plan to help them accomplish it.

In this chapter we have seen the approach of Jesus Christ, His apostles, and the prophets of the Old Testament in carrying out this ministry. They selected their followers carefully; they utilized the "with him" principle—the concept of association and example; and they had specific times of solid, clear, plain instruction.

Now the exciting thing is this. None of these is beyond the reach of the ordinary Christian. We can all share with others what we have learned. And we can pray that our lives will be an example to others to help them grow in their devotion to Christ and in their effectiveness in His cause.

