



A model of Growth Groups that grow disciples

- A Paper by Nathan Walter -

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(i) What are the biblical expectations of disciples?

In the New Testament, discipleship terminology is limited to the gospels and the book of Acts. The word *disciple* itself typically has two aspects to it: the relationship of a student to a teacher, and the notion of following along behind someone. Both are present throughout the gospels, whether the disciples are of John, of the Pharisees, or, most commonly, of Jesus. While the vast majority of uses are descriptive not prescriptive, five passages seem to hold paradigmatic significance for understanding the biblical expectations of disciples:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (Mt 16:24-25)

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mt 28:18-20)

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. (Jn 8:31)

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (Jn 13:34-35)

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (Jn 15:7-8)

From these, it seems that there are at least seven aspects to discipleship biblically considered. The **first** is that discipleship is to Jesus. In our context, 'discipleship' can often be used to refer to a 'one-to-one' Christian mentoring relationship. Whilst this is, of course, a valuable means of believers nurturing one another to maturity, care must be taken always to recall that Christian discipleship is to Jesus, not another believer. Further, it is a relationship of student to teacher and of servant to master.

The **second** aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship entails a life of suffering and self-denial. As Jesus indicated in his invitation to the disciples (Mt 16), primarily to be a disciple of Jesus is indicated by following him in a life of self-denial and suffering. At certain times and places this may well include literal martyrdom for his name's sake. For all disciples everywhere it will involve a costly and steadfast refusal to live for self, and an unashamed willingness to identify with Jesus out in the world, enduring whatever cost this may bring.

The **third** aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship requires obedience to Jesus' teaching. Aside from several other passages, this is one of the significant contributions of the Great Commission (Mt 28). If being a disciple of Jesus means to be in an ordered relationship with him of student to teacher and servant to leader, 'Jesus is Lord' cannot be merely a statement of doctrine, but a basis upon which real-time Christian ethics is worked out. Although our Protestant heritage can make us sensitive on the issue of obedience, for fear of falling into salvation-by-works, the New Testament knows nothing of discipleship without obedience.

The **fourth** aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship involves disciple-making. As Jesus commissioned in Mt 28, part and parcel of being a disciple is a commitment to disciple-making. The book of Acts presents a vivid working out of this principle in the life of the early church (e.g.,

8:4). This should in no way threaten the notion of the gift of the evangelist (Eph 4). Rather, it is simply an aspect of what it means to associate unashamedly with the king in the kingdom of God among a sinful and adulterous generation.

The *fifth* aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship leads to family love for other disciples. Jesus' post-foot-washing conversation (Jn 13) reveals the standard of his love as a paradigm for relationships between believers. This does not negate the call to love one's enemy (e.g., Mt 5:43-48), but it is consonant with the particular priority given to ministry directed at fellow believers (e.g., Gal 6:10). It is this aspect of discipleship that underpins the manifold 'one-another' ministries spoken of in the New Testament epistles.

The *sixth* aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship leads to fruit-bearing. The vine imagery (Jn 15) provides a reminder that disciples are to be growing not stagnating. Fruitfulness produces more fruitfulness; barrenness produces more barrenness. One specific aspect of this fruitfulness pertains to the extraordinary outcome of the prayers who is healthily growing on the vine – so attuned are they to Jesus and his teaching whatever they pray will be granted.

The *seventh* aspect of biblical discipleship is that discipleship involves holding on to Jesus and his teaching. The vine imagery (Jn 15) is also a vivid means by which Jesus articulates that the basis of the Christian life is the relational dynamic of abiding in him, and allowing his words and teaching to abide in you. Whatever else may be done during a group, this must be the final goal for group members. In this way, it is really a complement to the first aspect, that discipleship is to Jesus.

(ii) How can the biblical expectations of disciples be met in Growth Groups?

The *first* aspect: discipleship is to Jesus

There is a great risk here of making a motherhood-and-apple-pie statement. Yet we are convinced that even this first realization will have significant implications for the way in which macro decisions about the life of a small group are made. Given our commitment to the central role of Bible study in small groups, consider, for example, the way in which this consideration of discipleship will shape decisions around what parts of the Bible to study. It is entirely plausible that a group leader may choose to run a series of studies on the book of Amos. As God's word, it is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Yet remembering that discipleship first and foremost is about being in a relationship with Jesus, the motive in studying Amos cannot simply be: 'it's a book of the Bible I don't know very well yet', or 'my goal this year is to get my group studying a gospel, an epistle, and something from the Old Testament, and, well ... Amos is from the Old Testament'. Rather the goal must be very clearly: 'Amos is God's living and active word and, therefore, we must study it in such a way as to develop people's obedience to Jesus'. This may sound like a small shift. However, we are convinced that the difference in how studies are run will, in fact, be very significant, if only because the goal has been clarified and sharpened around the issue of discipleship.

Further, think what clarity might come to many of the pastoral conversations a leader has with group members once this first aspect of discipleship is remembered. Our chief concern for them should not be the stress of their workload at uni or at work; nor should it be the drain they experience through the busyness of family life; nor should it be sharing in their excitement at an upcoming overseas trip. Of course, none of these things should be avoided if our interactions with one another are to be genuinely all-of-life. However, once it is remembered that the first aspect of discipleship is that discipleship is to Jesus, these interactions now take a decidedly focused direction: how are they going *as disciples of Jesus* in the midst of a stressful workload at uni or

work, or in the busyness of family life, or in the excitement of an overseas trip? In each of these situations, how is their commitment to honor and serve Jesus as Lord and Savior growing? How is it being threatened? Further, as we encourage group members to shoulder their mutual obligations of care and encouragement, they, too, must be trained to have this clear focus in their interactions with each other: the goal is not just to share life together, but to share life together as Christians.

The *second* aspect: discipleship entails a life of suffering and self-denial

It is sometimes said that the Christian life is caught not taught. Biblically, we suggest it is both caught *and* taught. Yet inasmuch as the phrase is used to draw attention to that aspect of the Christian life that is learnt through modeling one to another, small groups provide an ideal setting in which to help people grow in this aspect of discipleship. A reality of life in an area like St Ives is that serious persecution of Christians simply does not happen. And yet on account of their faith many face mockery or intellectual derision at uni or at work or from family members and friends.

Biblically, of course, this is a thoroughly normal experience for disciples! Yet in practice it is still a very testing experience, and one of the means that God has provided to strengthen us in such times, and to encourage us to endure and keep associating with Christ unashamedly, is the fellowship of believers. In a regular small group, sharing stories of trial and hardship in the Christian life ought to lead to such fellowship as a regular experience. And it ought to drive us towards fellowship in prayer (e.g., Acts 4:23-31).

Aside from Christian persecution, Jesus also teaches that self-denial constitutes part of one's walk as a disciple. This, too, is well suited to being taught, modeled, and encouraged through small groups, for ideally, they provide a means by which disciples can observe each other's lives up close. In the gospels, wealth and possessions are a particularly significant 'test' of whether would-be disciples are prepared to deny self in order to follow Jesus. It is the same today, especially in a wealthy area like St Ives. Small groups need to be able to develop the levels of trust that are needed to work into each other's lives at this level, without fear of judgment, so that speaking the truth to one another in love genuine growth as disciples can be nurtured. One result of this kind of mutual encouragement to freedom from wealth and possessions may well be the kind of astonishing *koinonia* that characterized the early church (e.g., Acts 4:23-31).

The *third* aspect: discipleship requires obedience to Jesus' teaching

This is perhaps the area in which Bible study as an end in itself falls most short in the goal of growing disciples. When the goal is simply to know the Scriptures better, it is easy to plough through large or small chunks of the Bible without ever noticing the fact that little attention has been given to the issue of application. It is tempting at this point to follow the popular caricature of ministries that are either about truth or about life, and to argue that what we need is to design places where truth meets life. This sounds wise. However, our concern is that the result is often to sideline serious study of the Scriptures, as if there was some other way for us to find a place where truth meets life.

We contend, however, that the Scriptures are *the* place where truth meets life: God's living word written for the human condition, proclaiming to us his gracious deeds of salvation and teaching us how to live as recipients of his salvation. What is needed, then, is **not less Bible study, but better Bible study**, for there is actually very little in the Bible, when properly read, that would allow us the space to make it an object of our study rather than a means by which God continues to rule his people. This, however, is a perspective that must be recaptured in our small groups.

A most basic implication of all this is that leaders must take far more seriously that task of application. Whether it is within individual studies, or across a series of studies on a particular book, space must be left for careful, serious, practical application. **The traditional exegetical-heavy study fails because it does not bring God's word home to its proper conclusion, which is obedience to Jesus as Lord.** Naturally, leaders will be more adept at doing this if they are first applying the word diligently to themselves. In the weekly rush of preparing studies, it is easy for leaders to focus on finding the correct understanding of the passage. Inevitably, this affects what happens in groups. However, we suggest the same will be true when leaders first carve out the time to be changed by the word themselves.

Another significant advantage of small groups in working to this goal of discipleship is the way that group members can benefit from the wisdom and godliness of others. In any given group, there will be Christians who have worked out to varying degrees what the Christian life looks like in different spheres of life. In a group, they have the opportunity to share this wisdom with each other. Further, a small group that regularly meets together not only to know the Scriptures but to apply them, is able to reflect the biblical concern that the many should take for the one (e.g., 1Cor 5:1-5; Heb 3:12). In addition, it ought to provide obvious opportunities for mutual accountability, since the whole group is working through the same areas of godliness and living by God's grace.

The *fourth* aspect: discipleship involves disciple-making

Strategically at Christ Church, we have decided to deploy a lot of resources towards our Sunday congregational gatherings and our small groups ministry. One aspect of this strategy has required us to strip back many of the other programs we were running in the past. An area that has been affected by this is training in evangelism and disciple-making. Given that Sundays are intended to be the main 'front door' by which a guest can join us and hear the gospel, the task of training in disciple-making must now be shouldered in our small groups. Although, historically, this has not been a main focus of our groups, there are, in fact, three simple ways in which small groups can do this: training, prayer, and engagement together in the task of mission.

As far as training is concerned, there are many evangelism courses ideally suited to a small group setting. In fact, several of these have been designed specifically for this purpose! In the end, though, the particular course that is chosen is less significant than the fact that *a* course is chosen. Beyond learning a specific gospel outline or explanation, training in disciple-making should also include training group members to engage in meaningful apologetics, and in helping them think through how they might invest intentionally and lovingly in the lives of unbelievers for the sake of sharing with them the good news about Jesus.

In my own experience of participating in and leading small groups, it is the second of these that has been most lacking, even though it may be the one that is most significant in helping people grow in this area. To do this well, of course, requires in most situations that at least several weeks be set aside from the regular weekly program of Bible study specifically for this purpose. Towards the start of the year is perhaps the most effective time for this, since it can establish a culture within the group that keeps disciple-making high on the agenda of people's growth.

In this connections, prayer is a vitals means by which small groups can help their members grow as disciple-makers, for one of the surest ways, humanly speaking, to see people become more evangelistically active is to see them become more evangelistically prayerful. A regular small group is a good setting in which to do this, for it ought to provide a safe set of relationships in which we can share our struggles, failures, concerns and successes in this area of life, and gently urge each other to keep engaging in this task that we often find so daunting.

A final means of helping group members grow as disciple-makers is to engage in the task of mission together. Whether this be engaging in walk-up stranger evangelism on a university campus, or intentionally holding a social or outreach event to which group members can invite the

friends or family members they have been praying for, the different gifts and abilities within the group members can work together for building one another up in this disciple-making aspect of discipleship. One may be gifted in hospitality or inviting; another may excel at engaging with people apologetically. Working together, however, each can benefit from the different ways in which God has gifted different people.

The *fifth* aspect: discipleship leads to family love for other disciples

Here, perhaps, is where small groups, purely by virtue of size, come into their own. It is right to acknowledge that discipleship requires family love for other disciples. However, an aspect of our finiteness means that there are natural limits in our ability to obey this instruction. In a large church it is simply not possible for me to love all the other believers sacrificially, like family. Therefore, it is useful to organize church in such a way that enables people to love a small number of people sacrificially like family, and love a large number of people in a little way. In a group of 10-12 people who meet regularly, the opportunities for the practical demonstration of brother love in Christian community are almost endless. To live this way towards one another is to live with a commitment to expressing the unity of the gospel in action.

It is common in this context to identify the manifold ‘one another’ ministries spoken of in the New Testament. Broadly, it seems that these could be organized in three categories: **ministries of speech** (e.g., admonish one another, Col 3:16; confess your sins to each other, James 5:16; do not grumble against, slander, or lie to one another, Col 3:9; James 4:11; 5:9; pray for each other, James 5:16; teach one another, Col 3:16; speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, Eph 5:21); **ministries of action** (e.g., be kind and compassionate to one another, Eph 4:32; offer hospitality to one another without grumbling, 1 Pet 4:9; wash one another’s feet, Jn 13:14; greet one another with a holy kiss, 1 Cor 16:20; forgive one another, Col 3:13; serve one another, Gal 5:13; wait for one another when you eat together, 1 Cor 11:33); and a final category that might best be classified as **dispositions** (e.g., accept one another, Rom 15:7; bear with each other, Col 3:13; be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10); be patient, bearing with one another in love, Eph 4:2; clothe yourselves with humility to one another, 1 Pet 5:5; honor one another and have equal concern for each other, Rom 12:10; 1 Cor 12:25; stop passing judgment on one another, Rom 14:13).

Obviously, the formal time spent in a small group in the activities of studying God’s word and prayer provides a vital opportunity for the ministries of speech to take place. Yet even these can, and should, extend well beyond the formal times of a group meeting together. Sharing life together in small groups cannot be reduced to the physical, weekly event, and ‘gospelling’ one another in these ways needs to become the staple of our ordinary conversations with one another! The same could be said concerning the ministries of action.

For example, sharing meals together seemed to be a significant means for the early church to express *koinonia* (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor 11:17-34). This could easily be incorporated into the life of many Growth Groups, whether attached to the formal set times of meeting or not. To do this self-consciously as an act of brotherly love and unity in Christ, together with the opportunities this could provide for genuine one another ministry, would be very significant in helping group members grow in this aspect of being disciples. Recently, the leaders of one of our small groups handed invisible ‘tokens’ to each of the group members. These were to be cashed in with other group members at some point throughout the year when that member was in need of help. The commitment of the group was that if someone rang up to cash in their token and ask for help, if it was at all possible, the other group members would spring in to action, even if it was inconvenient. This provided a great means of reinforcing their mutual family obligations.

It is perhaps harder to identify how the dispositional one another ministries might be met in a small group, since they are not specific actions but rather dispositions. At one level, it is fine to

recognize that there are several steps we can take sociologically to help this along. We are people, after all, and that means some things work and some things don't! Thus, we may well speak about the important mutual benefits of self-disclosure, care-giving, humility, truth-telling and affirmation (Kindle). More deeply, however, we must continue to grapple with the fact that the Bible's strategy is to argue to these dispositions solely on the basis of gospel truth. For example, the reasons we are called to love one another are because we have been loved by Christ (Jn 13:34), because God is love (1 Jn 4:7, 11-12), because love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:8), because we have been born again through the living word of God (1 Pet 1:22-23), and because love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4:8). The indicative-imperative structure of Christian ethics is not our natural way operating, yet it is what God keeps offering us in Scripture.

The *sixth* aspect: discipleship leads to fruit-bearing

In some ways, this is a bit of a catch-all phrase, that incorporates several of the previous discussions. 2 Pet 1:8-9 presents two possibilities for those who have a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ: one can either be having the qualities of godliness in increasing measure, in which case their knowledge of Jesus is being effective and productive, or they can not have those same qualities of godliness, in which case the gospel of cleansing from past sin has been forgotten. This is a significant teaching for the evaluation of our small groups ministry. Put simply, is people's involvement in a small group, where the study of God's word is central, leading them to bear fruit? Are they, bit by bit and piece by piece, growing in godliness? Over the long term, is there observable change taking place in their life?

Again, as with some of the other aspects already discussed, a small group provides a good opportunity for this to take place. Ideally, what happens in a small group is that people get to observe each other up close. They get to observe the manifold ways in which people interact with those around them: with people they naturally get on with and with people they naturally don't get on with; with older people and with younger people; with people of the same sex and people of the opposite sex; with leaders and young Christians; over a meal or with the Bible open.

Further, as they work through different parts of the Bible and work hard at application, they ought to be sharing openly about how their Christian lives are being worked out with family and at their place of work or study and with their friends. As we get to observe each other up close, however, we have very real opportunities to observe genuine growth in godliness, to encourage the bearing of fruit and to warn against apathy. Above all, we have the opportunity to bring such matters before our heavenly father in prayer, for at day's end this is a work that God does in us as we strive to submit to his rule in all things.

The *seventh* aspect: discipleship involves holding on to Jesus and his teaching

One of the subtle dangers that can easily take place in a group that is striving to help members grow areas such as disciple-making, fruit-bearing, obedience and family love, is that people can easily lose sight of the gospel grounds upon which all these things must be based. A clear focus on abiding in Jesus and his teaching is perhaps the most significant element of discipleship that will prevent this from happening.

As an example, consider a typical men's group. Like most men's groups, they are acutely aware of godliness issues that they need to be thinking about and working at – most topics around money, sex and family life will fit the bill. They earnestly set about constructing a program to address these issues when they meet together. An easy trap is to end up with a whole lot of teaching that gives a whole range of biblical principles and instructions to godliness, but without much gospel grace to base it upon. The result can quickly be that, without realizing it, people are

trying to submit to rules that have an appearance of wisdom but which lack any value in restraining sin (e.g., Col 2:20-23).

We recently had an experience just like this. Some earnest leaders of our morning congregation men's groups were keen to start a ministry called *100% Men*. The goal was to see Christian men serving Jesus 100% in every area of their lives. Of course, this is exactly what our churches need. However, the gospel paradox is that before we can have 100% men, we need to have 0% men, who understand that Jesus alone is the one who saves them and they can do nothing but receive the benefits that he has won for them. This can be a fairly deflating realization, however. No one wants to be a 0% man! We want action. We want to *do* something. But with respect to salvation, we can do nothing. Jesus must do it all for us. And anything we ever do in our Christian lives must be set in that prior context. ***Therefore what is needed in our small groups is deeper teaching on the doctrines of grace, so that our growth in godliness is a response to grace and the product of grace, not a means to earning it.*** To abide in Jesus and in his teaching concerning himself and the kingdom of God: this must be the constant prayer of small group leaders, both for themselves and the members of their groups.