

The Challenge of Making Disciples on Campus

gcdiscipleship.com /2012/02/03/the-challenge-of-making-disciples-on-campus/

Jesus' message to his followers was to "make disciples." This is a huge, all-encompassing command. We evangelize, worship, teach, gather in community, and show mercy—but in doing all these things, we are to be making disciples. If we are not making lifelong disciples of Jesus, we are doing the wrong things or doing them in the wrong way.

If we are making disciples, then what we do will last for eternity and result in greater glory to God.

This is a particular comfort and challenge in the field of college ministry.

As we see in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), evangelism was never meant to be divorced from discipleship, and neither of these can be divorced from mission. Many ministries are discovering that making on-mission disciples is the best evangelistic strategy they can initiate. Still, making lifelong disciples is a challenge, a truth to which any of us who have wrestled with our students drifting away from the church and Jesus after graduation can testify.

What Is a Disciple?

Perhaps we need to start by demystifying the term "disciple." A disciple is a Christian, and a Christian is a disciple. Because of our modern obsession with compartmentalizing, we have acted as if there are two kinds of people in the church—Christians (the ones who "asked Jesus into their heart") and disciples (the ones who are more serious, more disciplined about their faith). But this isn't a biblical distinction. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not following Jesus. There is no allowance for someone to have Jesus as their Savior but not Jesus as their Lord. There is no such thing as a Christian who does nothing but sit around, passively absorbing content. The word "disciple" is used 230 times in the gospels and twenty-eight times in Acts. It is by far the most common way of referring to the people who followed Jesus and placed their faith in him.

Being a disciple means following Christ. More than that, it means responding daily to Jesus' instruction that "if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

This is a comprehensive following: it means to follow him in everything, even unto death. Where discipleship is involved, there is no room for a simple decision of faith divorced from genuine commitment and the rigors of following Jesus.

To be a disciple is to obey everything Jesus taught us. It is not merely to give cognitive assent to a set of truths, but to belong to a community. It is to be increasingly conformed, by grace, to Christ, and means joining him in his redemptive mission and heeding his sending and discipling commands. Similarly, the essence of discipling others is to say with Paul, "Follow me as I follow Christ." Being a disciple is always about Christ.

The concept of discipleship Jesus introduced ran counter to the prevailing notion of the teacher-disciple relationship. Jesus was not making disciples who would learn of him, become independent of him, and then make disciples of their own. His goal was that his disciples would make disciples not of themselves, but that they would go forth to make disciples of Jesus. The extent to which we enter the picture is only the extent to which we are conformed to Christ. This conformation must include following him in his redemptive mission.

“Do vs. Done” Discipleship

Because we follow Jesus Christ, true discipleship is always centered on the liberating and radical grace extended to us through him. I can't overstate how crucial this is, because our failure to keep discipleship gospel-centered is the very reason so many Christians find it distasteful. The gospel is about what Jesus has done to save us, not what we do to save ourselves. Gospel-centered discipleship is about living into our identity as accepted, adopted sons and daughters of God, and following Jesus by the strength and power he provides. The discipleship that many of us have experienced is often about self-control, self-reliance, self-righteousness when we “succeed” and self-reproach when we “fail.” Gospel-centered discipleship is about celebrating and growing into our acceptance, while works-centered discipleship is the ill-fated, soul-sucking, burnout-inducing attempt to earn God's approval.

The kind of discipleship that results in campus-saturating movements doesn't rely on people trying to prove to God, others, and themselves that they are worthy. Gospel-centered discipleship tells us we're not worthy, that we can't measure up, and it's only by grace that we'll become like Jesus.

While works-centered disciples spend most of their time looking down on everyone else or themselves for not measuring up, gospel-centered disciples spend their time looking up in wonder at the grace they have been shown. While works-centered disciples are usually arrogant or depressed, gospel-centered disciples radiate joy and exude a holy confidence. While works-centered disciples are profoundly self-focused, morbidly introspective, and narcissistic, gospel-centered disciples are Christ-focused and radically others-focused. While works-centered disciples try to run on the fumes of self-effort, gospel-centered disciples are propelled by the grace and power of God. To follow Christ works the same as being saved by him—by grace, through faith.

Have you ever watched one of those home improvement shows? A few years ago, some friends of ours were on Trading Spaces. This was before the days of tear-jerking extreme home makeovers, so with the make-over team, they just performed some cosmetic changes that consisted of buying new pillows, adding a fresh coat of paint, and rearranging furniture. But despite their TV home “makeover,” their home looked pretty much the same. It wasn't until years later, when they had a huge addition put on, that their home was transformed.

Works-centered discipleship—the kind for which we have such distaste, the kind in which the Pharisees and every legalist since them have indulged—makes cosmetic changes but fails to truly transform. It cleans things up a bit and makes for a good appearance, but nothing is really different. On the other hand, gospel-centered discipleship works from the inside out to truly transform someone. The emphasis is not on the external behaviors or the rigor with which we perform them. It's on receiving the grace of God, which alone can save and change us.

The Problem with Small Groups

“But wait,” you might be saying. “We already work hard at making disciples. In fact, we have a number of small groups designed to do just that!” The problem is that many of our small groups are not doing all that we need them to. The reason we fail to not only make new disciples, but hold on to the ones we have, is that our discipleship processes often lack essential missional foundations. This is particularly the case in what we could call *Just Small Groups Syndrome*, or JSGS.

JSGS emphasizes intellectual/cognitive knowledge instead of whole-life conformity to the truth. We've compartmentalized the learning from the being and doing. In the college ministry realm, we've implicitly told students that they can't “do” until they've learned enough. But Jesus taught his disciples through doing. What constitutes a successful small group? A team of people who would win Bible Jeopardy, or people who don't just hear the word, but do it? JSGS creates consumers instead of disciples. It creates people whose only expectation is to get fed, people who feel threatened if we call them to more than that. JSGS creates inward-facing, self-concerned communities instead of outward-engaging teams of missionaries.

What if discipleship weren't viewed apart from mission? What if one of the ways we grew in the gospel was not only through community, but through being embedded in a community in which people are on mission together?

We need more than small groups. We need missional communities — teams of students who share a burden for a particular people group and come together for the shared purpose of reaching that group together. They come together in community to preach the gospel to each other and to help each other share it with others. They come together for prayer, encouragement, and equipping. They come together to model the kind of community into which they're inviting others. They're not a once-per-week meeting, but a team or band committed to a common purpose. Groups that do this well are gospel-shaped communities on mission, and it is groups like these that God uses to transform lives, campuses, and the world.

This is an excerpt adapted from Stephen Lutz's book, [College Ministry in a Post-Christian Culture](#).

—

Stephen Lutz is a pastor with Calvary Baptist Church in State College, PA and a campus minister with CCO at Penn State University. He is the author of [College Ministry in a Post-Christian Culture](#), a book written to help college students and ministers recover the missional nature of college ministry. Steve is a native of the Philadelphia area. His interests include reaching college students, starting churches, innovation and entrepreneurship, and Penn State and Philly sports. He lives with his wife Jessica and their three children in Boalsburg, PA. He blogs at <http://www.stephenlutz.net> and tweets @stephenlutz.