

PART ONE: DISCIPLESHIP

In the Bible, Jesus called upon ordinary men, of various backgrounds and trades, to follow after him, that they may learn his ways. These disciples were expected to receive the teaching of Jesus and then respond in action to his lessons and examples. Youth leaders today are doing the very same thing within student ministry. We are calling students from various backgrounds, cultures, and cliques to follow after us as we point them toward the God that created, loves, and died for them. Discipleship begins with teaching, mentoring, and modeling Christ in such a way that students desire to do likewise. Thus, student discipleship is only complete when students take it upon themselves to continue the process of making disciples. This process, however, begins only as leaders willingly come alongside students, develop relationships with them, and live out for them what they desire to see happen in the students. Discipleship depends upon and revolves around relationships. In Matthew 3:18-22 we find Jesus inviting men to “Come, follow me.” As these men followed after Jesus, they were not simply taught, but rather saw disciplines, faith, and service carried out by their rabbi. This is the essence of true discipleship. We find further support for discipleship in 2 Timothy 2:2 where Paul is encouraging Timothy to continue the discipleship process by raising up those who can teach and model what it means to be a follower of Christ. Paul offers, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). Bo Boshers states that, “This verse calls leaders and students to continually invest in the lives of others.”¹ As youth leaders, our call is to invest ourselves in becoming and calling disciples of Christ. But what does discipleship consist of? In the following section, I will

¹ Bo Boshers, *Student Ministry for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 176.

examine the aspects of and reasoning behind discipleship and then move on to address developmental issues and specifics of our discipleship program.

WHAT: ASPECTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

So what should a student discipleship curriculum consist of? Student discipleship should consist of community, spiritual disciplines, biblical instruction, evangelism, and service. These are the core elements of discipleship. Through these avenues students begin to embrace the ways of Christ by looking both inward at themselves and outward towards others. When it comes to building community we must understand, as stated before, that discipleship is relational. These relations extend not only between mentor and disciple, but also between the students within the ministry as they develop a community. In Hebrews, we find a call to community where believers meet together that they may continually be faithful to the cause of Christ. Paul writes, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25). From this verse, it is clear that by meeting together with other believers we can in some way sharpen each other in the faith (Proverbs 27:17).

Discipleship is also about encouraging students in spiritual disciplines. It is through spiritual disciplines that students begin to see God in new ways. We invite students to see God through worship, prayer, meditation, fasting, solitude, confession, and simplicity, just to name a few. Through these avenues students open their souls and minds to different facets of God and his purpose and love for us. As Richard Foster suggests in his classical book, “The purpose of

the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear.”² Spiritual disciplines teach students to view all of life as an opportunity to praise their creator. These disciplines also help them to understand that faith in Jesus Christ is a way of life and not just a choice to be made. Including these as a part of a discipleship curriculum is crucial to character and spiritual development. Adele Calhoun points out the origins of spiritual disciplines in her book. She states, “The basic rhythm of disciplines (or rule) for the first believers is found in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [a practice] and to the fellowship [relationships], to the breaking of bread [an experience] and to prayer [another practice].”³ By encouraging active, contemplative practices, we are enabling students to deepen their faith and understandings of our divine creator.

Another aspect of discipleship is encouraging students to fall in love with the Word of God. It is through scripture that we begin to see a more complete picture of God as the Holy Spirit illuminates the text. Just as Joshua was instructed by God, we too must instruct students to meditate on the Word of God (Joshua 1:8). This only happens however, when we demonstrate our love for God’s word and show them its transformative attributes through our own changed lives. For as it offers in Hebrews, “the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). Our job as youth leaders is to transform the way that our youth view the Bible. We must teach them to stop simply scanning the Bible, and to start studying and discerning the Biblical texts. On this, Mike King notes, “I have been introducing young people to the Bible as a sacred text, teaching them how to read it differently, teaching them how to experience the depth and richness of all that is there. Instead of reading the Bible

² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 2.

³ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 17.

for quantity I show them how to read it qualitatively.”⁴ Only by encouraging students to fall in love with the word of God, will we begin to see our students rise above our teaching and become passionate disciples of Christ.

When it comes to teaching our students about evangelism, we must understand that discipleship and evangelism are almost synonymous. Both discipleship and evangelism call for believers to pour themselves into others, but where evangelism is that done toward those outside the faith, discipleship is done in order that believers might “sharpen” each other within the faith. Discipleship calls for and leads believers toward evangelism through developing spiritual friendships. While each of these contain similar elements that center around relationships, the one true distinctive between the two is the identity with and in Jesus of each party involved in the relationship. This identification with Christ determines whether the relationship is one of discipleship or evangelism. Within the church, our commission should be to develop disciples who are passionate about evangelism. Thus, evangelism is the process of articulating the saving grace that we have in Jesus both through verbal and nonverbal means as well as by developing spiritual friendships that allow questions about faith to be discussed within community. Evangelism is only completed when spiritual friendships develop into discipleship.

When it comes to service, Jesus modeled for us the essence of a true servant. In fact, in Matthew 20:26-28 he states, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” For Jesus, heaven could be realized on earth as believers laid down their lives in service to others. Just before sending out the twelve to serve and teach others in his name, Jesus comments that “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matt. 9:37). Here, Jesus is commenting that what he desires are those

⁴ Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 142.

willing to set themselves aside and work for the kingdom of God. This requires a willingness to neglect selfish ambitions and serve not only God, but humanity. For Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). I agree with Efrem Smith when he states that, “As we look the youth in our ministries, we should be praying to God that he would use us to raise up our young people as *servants* who are equipped to go out into the harvest field.”⁵ In Ephesians, Paul refers to service as “good works.” He states, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). From this passage, it is very clear that God created us to be a blessing to others and that through this, he is pleased. In addition, Paul also makes it clear that by serving non-believers they may come to know Christ through our good works. He states, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). Having examined the importance of community, spiritual disciplines, the Word of God, evangelism, and service within discipleship, we can now turn our attention toward those we are intending to reach.

WHO: ADOLESCENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL; GRADES 9-12

As we minister to adolescence, we must approach conveying our core beliefs in ways that compliment where our students are developmentally. One area of development that youth leaders must acknowledge is a youth’s ability to process abstract thought. Jeffrey Arnett defines abstract thought as something that “cannot be experienced directly through the senses.”⁶ Examples of abstract thought include faith, justice, goodness, evil, and morality. As an adolescent develops,

⁵Efrem Smith, *Raising Up Young Heroes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 103.

⁶Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2007), 69.

he or she is able to further grasp or conceptualize what these are and how they affect others as well as themselves. Thus, when I choose to include service, which brings about justice and goodness, as one of my core values, I am asking students to wrap their minds around something that is abstract. I am asking my students to go against the laws of nature which lean toward survival of the fittest and asking them to improve the survival of the weak. As students begin to foster to “the least of these” they are enacting justice and goodness and living in faith that God intends better for his creation. As youth leaders we are actually improving their cognitive development as well as their spiritual lives by asking them to consider abstract concepts that are enacted through concrete actions. Just as Jesus commissioned his disciples to a life of service by washing their feet (John 13:1-17), so too are we to commission our students to live and think abstractly by putting others’ needs before their own.

A larger area of development that youth leaders must acknowledge is the battle that each adolescent goes through as they develop their own identity. Every student is on a subconscious journey to figure out who they are, who they are in relation to others, and who they are in relation to God. In his book about adolescence, Jeffrey Arnett offers that “One of the most distinctive features of adolescence is that it is a time of thinking about who you are, where your life is going, what you believe in, and how your life fits into the world around you.”⁷ A youth curriculum should function to address these issues of identity as a student strives to define themselves. This time between puberty and adulthood is a vital time that largely determines who a person is and where they are headed. Because of this, a youth curriculum must be intentional in the messages that it is sending a student. A student is already being sent messages by their culture, parents, school, and peers, along with the messages that their changing body is sending

⁷ Arnett, *Adolescence*, 175.

them. In fact, one documentary titled, “Inside the Teenage Brain,” offered that during puberty, around age 14, a student’s brain experiences tremendous growth and it is during this time that a student absorbs an increased amount of knowledge due to an overproduction of cells in the frontal cortex. If these cells are not used, however, they die. This is why it is so important to send students a consistent message about who they are, who they are to us, and who they are to God. We must continually reiterate that there is a God in heaven who loves them just as they are, but loves them so much that he doesn’t want to leave them the same. Because adolescents are on a journey to discover their identity we must program our ministries in a way that provides opportunities for students to not only discover themselves, but discover their relationship with God. Students accomplish this by becoming practical theologians, or “disciples whose obedience to God in the church and in the world puts their truth claims into practice.”⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean also notes that “If youth ministry is going to help adolescents become practical theologians, then we must begin by helping them practice faith, which requires both a relationship with Jesus Christ and opportunities for ministry as teenagers.”⁹ Thus, I strive to make my ministry and discipleship program one of opportunities where students come to serve and be served.

⁸ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Starting Right* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19.

⁹ Dean, *Starting Right*, 33.