

Executive Summary
Love Well
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Discipleship doesn't happen in a factory; it happens in a field.

We tend to think of spiritual growth through the industrialization lens. There are systems, processes, and plans. There are steps, progressions, and logical trajectories. None of these things are bad. Or wrong. Or unnecessary. And yet the perspective in which we might approach discipleship might be all wrong. That's because disciples are grown; they aren't manufactured:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples" (John 15:5-8).

This, of course, is one of the best-known descriptions of life in Christ in the whole Bible. Jesus, in describing what it means to live and grow in Him, used an agricultural metaphor, and this metaphor provides a needed perspective shift for us. When we make disciples, we aren't putting together cars or assembling furniture. Of course, there is a process, but it's a process that involves human beings. Human beings doing the discipling, and human beings being disciplined. For that reason, we must be careful that we don't put too much faith in a process and too little faith in the God who sits over the process. That's industrialization – that if we simply have the right raw ingredients, then follow the right steps, then out comes a mature follower of Jesus. Like an assembly line.

There are twists and turns. There are emotions and feelings. There are circumstances of great joy and terrible despair. And all these things come together, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to move us toward Christlikeness. As we seek to love one another in groups, then, we must make sure that we are organized, logical, and above all intentional - but we must not be overly rigid. For that rigidity can indicate that we have replaced faith with procedure; that we have supplanted the work of the Holy Spirit with the ingenuity of man; that we are trusting in our own ideas rather than in God's formative work.

We must have the field in mind when we approach loving one another in groups, lest we create a system without a soul. There are three key principles to remember when considering the environment of the group as a field for growing disciples:

Principle 1: Create opportunities for relationships.

Every environment needs a structure. The structure is the organization of that environment; it helps to set the expectations and provides a sense of security for those who are a part of it. It would be a mistake to think that an unstructured and purely organic group would be a field for the creation of relationships; it would instead serve the opposite purpose as people would likely stick together in small, previously formed relationships and eventually stop coming at all.

Much like the boundaries laid on a field provide the kind of environment for true growth and health to happen, the structure we put on our groups can have the same purpose if we are thoughtful about it. There are a few key points to consider as this structure is created:

- Dialogue: Group leaders should understand that lecturing to their group does little to encourage the development of relationships. Further, doing so is often a less effective learning methodology than a more experiential kind of environment. When groups are centered on the receiving of content rather than participating in learning, group members subconsciously understand that their role in that group is not to contribute, but only to receive which in turn fosters the permission to remain isolated.

When choosing both teachers and curriculum, the group should make sure that both are intentional about encouraging conversation not only prior to and at the end of a group, but during that group as well. Leaders should be skillful at the forming and asking of questions, directing conversations, and encouraging dialogue rather than dispensers of content only.

- Prayer: Prayer should be approached in such a group not as a necessary ending to that group, but as a core piece of the vitality of that group. Prayer is not only how we bring each other's needs before God; it's also an opportunity for relational development as we share those needs with each other and continue together in seeing how God responds to the supplication of the group. For that reason, the "content" of the group must be planned to intentionally leave room for extended periods of prayer and sharing with one another. Groups should also set the expectation in the area of prayer to keep in regular contact with one another (outside of the group environment), to pray together, and to inform each other of the fact that prayers are being made on their behalf.

Principle 2: Cultivate an environment of care.

What should our groups be known for? They should of course be known for biblical faithfulness, a welcoming spirit, and a connection point in the church. But in the midst of those characteristics, our groups ought to be known as caring environments. If we want the field of

groups to grow disciples, then they should be the smaller groups where real ministry takes place in the church. How does a group cultivate an environment of care?

- Assigning roles. The old adage is that if something is everyone's job, then it's nobody's job. The same thing is true in group structure. Of course, it is everyone's job to care for one another, but someone must lead, organize, and maintain those intentional efforts. The first step to that end is empowering a specific group member who knows that their primary responsibility in the group is to know, better than anyone, what is going on in the lives of group members. That knowledge then enables practical components of care to happen, such as providing meals, hospital visitation, and other tangible expressions. Chances are when one person takes the initiative in this respect, more and more people will take their own degree of ownership in the group.
- Time management. The group leader must be able to shift the focus of the group when it comes to care. The leader must not be so committed to the content they are bringing to the group that they cannot abbreviate it specifically for the purpose of care. They must be willing and able to manage the resource of time to take advantage of pivotal moments in the life of the group that warrant a special extended time of listening or prayer. A willingness to do this is an expression to the whole group that we truly care for one another and are committed to one another's good.

Principle 3: Culminate in an ongoing lifestyle.

Nothing grown in the field is ultimately meant to stay in the field; the field is only the beginning stage. In the same way, groups must understand that the "end game" is not what happens during the confines of the group, but rather what happens *between* group meetings. There are several ways to emphasize this principle:

- Press for practicality. It's possible for a group to have a very lively and enjoyable discussion and yet that group meeting to be unsuccessful. In order for it to be successful, each member must leave the group knowing how the truth they encountered in God's Word and through others changes them on a day-to-day basis. The "scorecard" for group success, then, must go beyond whether the group is enjoyable; it is instead measured in the day to day lives of the group members.
- Even smaller groups. Groups are a subset of the larger church. However, to foster an environment in which gospel truth is lived out, these groups must get even smaller. That means members of the group must commit to communicating, socializing, and praying with each other between meetings. These between times are what gives richness to the time the group meets together. Laying this expectation out early, by way of example from the leaders, is a key first step.

While it's true that field growth is not nearly as clean, efficient, or even measurable as factory growth, it's ultimately much healthier. This kind of group - one that is built on relationships, care, and forging an ongoing lifestyle - is how disciples are grown, and then grown again.