

An Educational History of Discipleship

By Jessie Cruickshank

Thankfully, there is new wave of impetus on discipleship in the church. Because of that new recovered interest in the subject, many rush to publish books on the best methods and curricula. While these are helpful and a great place to start, it is very important to think about the historical background and current cultural paradigm that implicitly informs and under-girds our concepts of discipleship – and discover how they are hindering our fulfillment of the Great Commission.

To draw the best picture, it is important for us to consider how discipleship has changed over time. First, we need to consider some of the history of education because how we have made disciples is directly and intimately correlated with the types and methods and ways we have thought about education. Because the church is not that much more creative than the culture, the way the culture has thought about education becomes the same way the church thinks about it as well.

Neil Cole (and others) have written about how Paul thought about and made disciples. An examination of those methods is beyond the scope of this paper other than to identify that 1) it was done as a community or town, and all persons participated; 2) apprenticeship was the main method of education; and 3) the purpose of discipleship was to increase one's union with God in all aspects of life.

These foundational characteristics remained intact up until about 300 AD when, as we all know, Constantine entered the storyline and created the separation between clergy and laity. Suddenly and catastrophically, we abandoned the concept of equally discipling everybody and equal standing as disciple-makers. It became Clergy's responsibility to be

educated and trained, and everyone else's responsibility to follow them. It is a concept that has seldom been challenged in the last 1700 years.

To pick up our historical thread, starting in 300 AD, people were being trained for clergy status and there was a very specific process for that. Additionally, because it's also an illiterate society, there remained an enchanted aspect to discipleship. People were not really able to learn through textual study (as is now common in seminaries), so they were disciplined through stories and encounters with the spiritual realm. The world itself was enchanted, much more magical, much more mystical, full of angels, omens, relics, and supernatural encounters. Apprenticeship as a means of education remained, but it was an isolating experience. For example, if one became interested in ministry, wanted to learn more about God, or had an interest in the spiritual, they would leave and attend a monastery. There they would learn how to read and write, but they would be taken away and secluded from the rest of society in order to be trained. Moreover, their practice was not for everybody and there were few to discuss the ideas with. Essentially, it was a fairly isolated process of education. Discipleship as Jesus spoke of it did not exist. Rather, individuals were trained in a mystical profession.

About 1200 years later, Martin Luther enters into the story with the Age of Enlightenment spanning the 1500s and 1600s. As people began to learn to read and social literacy was increasing, the value of individual bible reading strongly took hold. Yet there remained the clergy-laity split, with the clergy wielding great power over people's lives in how they read the bible. Many, many people were killed for reading the same scriptures and coming to alternate conclusions. Massacres of different Christian sects were common. Yet, because of this sectarian violence that dominated the first 200 years after the

Protestant Reformation, and until about 1900, there still remained little to no value in every person making disciples. As the varying Christian sects articulated their differing theologies, theology itself became an academic pursuit. That meant that to gain clergy status, one had to read, study, and become an academic.

Because of the Enlightenment, the faith life and discipleship lost its mystical quality. It lost its *enchantment* and became very rational, very western, very Aristotelian. Instead of mystery, we gain knowledge by measuring and defining. In the Enlightenment era, society didn't believe something existed unless it could be measured, defined, and explained. People believed they could know the *quality* of what exists by how they measure it. This includes God, and faith, so society developed a new science: Theology.

The Western world began to build schools, seminaries and universities where people studied theology, hermeneutics, and exegesis. In that era, the pursuit of God functionally took the shape of looking at one's own understanding of scripture in order to discover the truth. Scholars develop systematic ways to interpret the Bible. The study of theology comes to include learning the languages of Greek and in the Hebrew. And at its foundation, the pursuit of God is an academic one. In the Age of Enlightenment, society realized that man was quite intelligent, could study the past, and build upon previous knowledge. Academics learned to study the world to specific ways to measure and analyze it. Scholars determined how the heavens are made by analyzing the ways the stars were laid out and observing celestial bodies. They discovered and invented the sciences of physics, calculus, and many mathematical means. The unfortunate result was that the spiritual formation was edited out of the development of clergy, and faith became a very academic pursuit.

The corresponding result in society was that disciple making also became an academic pursuit. Disciple making became educating people in the book of the Bible, becoming educated in what we knew of biblical times and culture, and becoming educated in the languages of the Bible. But again still, there is little value for the discipleship for every person beyond that "Christian Education." Clergy status becomes less of a calling, and more of a vocation, like being a physicist. It loses that *enchantment* quality.

Then, something very interesting happens in the early 1900s. The Pentecostal Revival breaks out, including the Azusa Street Revival, and the enchantment comes back to our spiritual formation. Through the revivalist era, there is a new found desire for every person to have an authentic encounter and an authentic relationship with Jesus. There is now a value of every person being involved in a personal relationship with Jesus, as opposed to a state church or social religion.

But interestingly, at the same time the spiritual life is becoming re-enchantment and there is increased value for authentic discipleship, there comes the Industrial Revolution and the unprecedented idea of schooling for everyone. The reason for creating schools for everyone, for establishing public education, was explicitly to create a labor force. The educational architects at the turn of the last century decided that society needed to make an every man a quality worker. This quality worker was defined by specifically identifying the "normal man" or "average man." This created by the effort to "normalized" or to make every person the same so they could work a job in a factory interchangeably. People needed to be able to do the same job the same way because they were working with the same machines or they were working with the same components. It didn't really matter who an individual is, how tall they are or how long their arms are. Schools were also designed for

everyone to be trained in the same skill set, to a very detailed level of specificity. For example, it should take 3 seconds to grab the milk and it should take 2 seconds to pour the milk in the vat, and it should take 1 second to discard the empty vessel over here. Labor skill sets were program-ized. By design, schooling worked to eliminate qualities of individuality. The goal of school was to create uniform persons who could fit into the work force like identical cogs in a wheel. Ford, the automaker, was very intentional and influential in designing American schools this way. It was not just a philosophy of creating a labor force; it was his philosophy for how society worked best. He believed that every person should be average, every person should fit the same mold, every person should be exactly the same, and it was society's duty to help individuals conform to the average as much as possible. Any deviation from the average was a problem; was something that was mal-formed. Today we have taken that so far that we diagnosed things outside of the 'norm' as a disease. The physicians' reference is huge because everything outside of this very narrow 'normal' was named and often medicated. We adopted this paradigm in the church world and sacralized the "widget-making" by saying we want to help everyone be "like Jesus," rather than helping people become who Jesus created *them* to be.

As we entered into the 1920s, those who envision a "normed" society became influenced by those who believed in the class system. They believed that some people were inherently better than others, and "average" became a status that was "less than." About that time, post WWI, the America military was analyzing their solder sorting processes and decided that it needed to separate common soldiers out from potential military leaders. In answer to this need the IQ test was invented to rank people. Society had fully embraced the 'normal' bell curve. They were actively and pervasively ranking across it.

The ideal is no longer the normal or the average; the ideal now is the *above average*. The ideal became the thin part of the bell curve that says you are better than everybody else. This is literally why grades were invented for school. The purpose of grades is to rank. First, you normalize everybody along the bell curve, and then you rank them with grades to sort out the better ones from the lesser ones.

But how does this history influence our current understanding and practice of discipleship? If you take the concept of the ideal as being above average, and layer in the clergy-laity split, the resulting conception is that a person is called to ministry if they are above average in reading the Bible. Or one is called to ministry if they are above average in their spiritual encounter. Or one is probably called to ministry if they are above average in their passion for the gospel and sharing it with others. Our philosophy of discipleship has, and continues to follow the same paradigm of schooling.

Today we have the value of educating everybody in the Bible and every person having their own relationship with Jesus, but we have an implicit normalized bell curve of discipleship, and we still have the same process for everyone. Ford's goal was to create uniform widgets out of people and our philosophy or paradigm of discipleship has not gone beyond that. We are still trying to uniformly create widgets of disciples. And the resulting widget is not a disciple in the rabbinical sense as much as it is a person who is educated. Because if we look at the trajectory of history, a disciple is still defined by their education, just as it was in the Age of Enlightenment. And because of the Industrial Revolution, we now look to mass-produce them. In our process of mass producing widget-disciples, we have the form of church that we have, where they are laid out like school and have big sermons. Churches are often designed and laid out the exact same way as a school, with a

teacher up front with everybody sitting in their own happy, little rows to be uniform. That is an atmosphere and a layout that is intentionally designed to control behavior and create conformity. That is how many churches have envisioned making disciples.

In the last 30 years, things have gotten a little better. We have gotten more creating and developed different paths and methods of discipleship. But we still hang onto the implicit goal of the uniform widget-disciple. We still do not see the individual. We still do not see individual calling, and our discipleship methods have not yet embraced the biblical call for everyone to be a disciple-maker. We haven't gotten there yet, but hopefully we can start to turn the tide.

Currently, most churches are using one of three basic processes of making disciples. The first one is the mass-produced member, where the discipleship process is really a membership process, focusing around membership classes including more about the denomination of the church and discipleship is 'process' of becoming part of the church. This is extremely common method.

Another very common method is what I call the HR-recruitment strategy. This is where you may or may not have membership, but you need people to staff and volunteer all of the roles within a church. You need ushers, you need hospitality team, you need Sunday school teachers. So the discipleship process looks like inviting people to connect, giving them a ministry gifts test, and then plugging them into the church ministry that seems like the best fit for them. And that is what that church calls discipleship. Most churches that do not have membership and if you ask them their philosophy of discipleship, it involves plugging a person into a ministry team and letting them serve. Because in that paradigm, service is discipleship. That's a very shepherd-gift kind of

paradigm. This is not a derogatory statement; shepherds can make disciples. But they know how to do that by being in proximity with people. The basic paradigm is that when we are all doing something together, then we are disciples. The limitation of this is that it is just one fifth of what it means to be a disciple and one fifth of what it takes to make disciples. The HR-recruitment strategy is the shepherd's version of making disciples.

Another method that is less common today, but still occasionally employed, is the curriculum strategy. It usually takes the form of a book, which is often paired with a workbook or some great teaching videos. In this paradigm, disciples are made by reading the book together and discussing it. This is a very teacher-esque philosophy of discipleship. Again, that's just one fifth, and it doesn't meet everybody's needs, especially those who are not great at reading or are external processors.

For example, my husband reads 100s of articles on the web, but he does not read books and does not learn well from them. So the teacher-paradigm of using curriculum to make disciples does not work for him. Also, he is an introvert. The worst thing I did for our marriage was make him volunteer on the usher team with me. That did not go well. So if you are asking him to serve other people publicly, he is not going to fit. And if you are asking him to read a book, he doesn't fit in that. So how does my husband become a disciple? How is he being made a disciple of Jesus, when 2 of the main strategies completely miss who he is as a person, and miss the way God created him? It is not a character flaw that he doesn't learn through reading a book. It's how God made him. So there has to be a different method of discipleship in order to reach him. He is not a widget. He is not a blank slate.

Disciples are not blank slates either and yet we treat them like that. They come into church and our discipleship process, they come into a small group, and we think of them as

a blank slate of having never encountered God's truth, having never heard God speak to them, until He did so through us or our discipleship process. And that is not very acknowledging of the sovereignty of God and that's not very acknowledging of the passion of the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth. Because that's the way culture thinks about education, that's the way the church thinks about education. And the church has not been more creative than culture in leading people into truth and walking with them on their journey of discipleship.

Something that is very important to me whenever considering discipleship is that a true philosophy of discipleship or a true method of discipleship needs to be employable by *every person, every place, every time*. If your philosophy of discipleship or your method of discipleship focuses on everybody coming to church, then it is not movemental. If your philosophy or process of discipleship involves everybody going to specific home group or hearing from a specific teacher, then it is not movemental. If your philosophy or process of discipleship cannot happen from any person to any other person, then we have missed it. We have missed the mark. If you require your disciple-makers to have a seminary degree or really have amazing theology in order to make disciples, then it is not movemental.

We have missed the mark. And we have thought too highly of our own theology. All of us have broken theology. All of us have things when we get to heaven and say, "Oh, I didn't know that. I totally messed that up." We have to let go of a high level of exactness. We also have to let go of the requirement of coming to a specific place to be discipled. And we have to let go of requiring a high level of maturity (or education) that is required in order to make disciples. Because, if we require those things, we have missed the beauty of Jesus promising to be truth incarnate in our midst. And we have missed the threshold of

what it means to be a disciple-maker, which is not a call to a specific level of education or to a specific power of calling, but to everyone.

Our discipleship process has to grow beyond our concepts of education in our society. It has to be something that becomes much more viral, much more movemental, much less rigid, much more enchanted, and much more dependent upon the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide us, to speak through us. Only the Holy Spirit can actually make a disciple through an immature believer and it's exactly supposed to be that way.