AN INVITATION TO
Discipleship

Essential Truths and Standards of Excellence

John L. Musselman
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Discipleship

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In 1871, A.B. Bruce, a Scottish pastor and theologian, wrote what many consider to be the best book ever written on how Jesus trained the Twelve, shaped their lives, and prepared them to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. After more than 140 years, The Training of the Twelve has stood the test of time and has been instrumental in transforming the lives of thousands of men and women whose eyes have been opened to see Jesus as never before, and who are now committed to following him and his plan for reaching the nations of the world with the gospel of grace.

In my fourth edition copy of Bruce’s classic, published in 1888, a short phrase of four curious Greek words stands out against the white background of the page immediately following the title page. In Greek and in translation, these words deliver a soliloquy of unparalleled importance which reveals the key to Jesus’ ministry in the lives of the twelve Apostles.

Dr. Bruce excerpted the phrase from Acts 4:13 in the Greek New Testament: “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (NASV). Translated literally, these words mean “they were with Jesus.” The NIV reads, “These men had been with Jesus.” In one brief phrase, the Scriptures capture the essential means by which Jesus imparted his life and teachings to these men. He was simply with them. The disciples learned by listening to his words and by studying his life. Jesus had imprinted his life upon these men by spending time with them.

Everett F. Harrison, author of A Short Life of Christ, acknowledges the significance of Jesus’ investment in these men when he writes: “At the end of his public ministry, Jesus had nothing tangible to leave as a monument of his life work. There was no literature, nor was there an institution to memorialize him. He had chosen instead to invest himself in a small group of men. From them came eventually the literature and the institution of the church. Looking back from the vantage point of the apostolic age, it is not difficult to see that the most important work of Christ prior to his death and resurrection was the selection and training of the men who would represent him in the world in the coming days. Significantly, it was to these men that he devoted himself almost exclusively in the interval between the resurrection and the ascension, and very largely so in the months prior to his death.”

In Christian discipleship, there is only one model for us to follow. The Gospel records reveal the principles and methods Jesus used to transform these uneducated and untrained men. “So, it shouldn’t surprise us that, since they were with Jesus so long, they would prove to be exceptionally good and noble men when they came before the world as leaders of a great movement, and were called on to carry out their responsibilities.”

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We can become like Christ in character and in power and thus realize our highest ideals of well-being and well-doing. That is the heart of the New Testament message.

Do you believe this is possible?

My central claim is that we can become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.

Dallas Willard, PhD
Late Professor, School of Philosophy
University of Southern California
The Spirit of the Disciplines
Invitation to Discipleship is designed for anyone interested in becoming a more devoted follower of Jesus Christ. It is an invitation for you to become the man or woman God has called you to be. You are being asked to become a part of a discipleship group in order that you might learn how to “become like Christ in character and in power,” that is, a more mature follower of Christ. The Scriptures tell us that God is looking for those “whose hearts are fully committed to him,” who “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”

True Christian discipleship always involves life transformation. Christ invested 3½ years with twelve men, imparted his life to them, and made them like him. In this relatively brief association, these untrained and uneducated men were refined in character, behavior, and speech. Inwardly, their minds and hearts were shaped to fuel new attitudes, motives, and desires. They were no longer what they had been. From their earliest days in Galilee to the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, their lives were radically altered by Jesus. Likewise, your invitation to discipleship is an invitation to life transformation in Jesus Christ.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, the Twelve spread the message of his love and atoning sacrifice throughout the known world, obedient to their Master’s command to “make disciples of all the nations.” Whether they labored in prison or as free men, in the midst of wealth or poverty, in times of persecution or peace, these men faithfully presented the life-changing message of the gospel to all who would listen, including the hungry, dying, demon possessed, widows, orphans, hopeless, and imprisoned. The long string of mature, reproducing believers they left behind reveals the effectiveness of Jesus’ training and their faithfulness to his strategy for world conquest. Your invitation to discipleship, then, is also an invitation to learn how to “gossip the gospel” with those who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to help them become mature followers of Christ.

Key biblical concepts about discipleship are presented here that will help you make an informed decision about your involvement. Please begin by reading The Call on the following page, a poem that presents a vision for Christian discipleship while addressing the inner struggles and practical realities that every thoughtful person encounters when considering the call of Christ to follow him.

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1 Dallas Willard
2 II Chronicles 16:9.
3 Matthew 6:33.
5 This phrase was used by Dr. J.I. Packer in an address at Oxford University during the international centennial celebration of C.S. Lewis’ birth in July, 1998.
THE CALL

Within these walls of pen and ink, there lies an unseen door,
An entrance to a richer life, full heart as ne’r before.
A splendid garden of virtue and grace, character refined,
Abloom with deeds both pure and light, remaining in the vine.
Full trained and ready for the fight, my all I yield to Thee,
Obedient to my Master’s call, “Come and follow me.”

Leave behind my familiar room, comfortably at ease,
Where programs live and studies rule, and classes never cease?
My teacher knows the truth, you see, and leads us all to gain,
No expectation e’er showered on me, the gospel without pain.
Should not I give my soul in praise each and every week,
And live content with all I know, without the lost to seek?

I think should I approach the door, a turn my life would take,
For I would learn my Master’s ways, and from my sloth I’d wake.
First learn how Pilgrim8 made his way, as Bunyan saw his dream,
An allegory fit for praise, a work of art it seems.
Then sit at Bruce’s9 feet a spell, a prof of old who knew
The life of Jesus with the Twelve, and how he trained a few.

Four years evokes a cry within, “Too long and much too hard!”
Yet do I not admire the oak, strong ringed within my yard?
Nature knows how power and strength, produced within the limbs,
Ne’r comes in one year’s growing, nor by magician whims.
How then, we say, can life be shaped within a month or two,
And filled with every needful thing, the Master’s job to do?

Commit I to the task at hand, prepare myself to reach God’s world,
No looking back, no cost too great, trade in my all for one great Pearl.
Shun fear and failure, the Liar’s voice;
‘Tis true I have no other choice.
The Father moved with mercy, see, sent man his only Son;
And loved me so that I might serve, and hear the words, “Well done.”

- John L. Musselman

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8 The main character in Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan.
9 A.B. Bruce, author of The Training of the Twelve.
The opening stanza raises a crucial question which every believer should ask: “Is there a doorway to a richer life in Christ?” For too many, the promises of the gospel are never appropriated and experienced by faith. The poem’s claim is that on the other side of this “unseen door” there is a “splendid garden of virtue and grace,” a proper environment where one’s character may be shaped and refined by the gospel, where one may truly “be filled up to all the fullness of God.”

Character is not the only target for transformation, however. This lush garden is also “abloom with deeds both pure and light.” One of the joys of walking through a botanical garden in spring is being able to see the beauty of the new flowers that have just emerged from the hidden bulbs planted beneath the soil. Exploding with color, they offer a genuine feast to those who visit. Similarly, good works flow from one’s character, from an enlightened and softened heart that is living under the daily influence of the Holy Spirit. James says it this way: “Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” So, the seed of the gospel planted in a prepared and receptive heart will always spring forth into godly deeds when the believer is set on “remaining in the vine.” “Apart from me,” Jesus said, “you can do nothing.”

Furthermore every man, every woman should be “full trained and ready for the fight,” thoroughly equipped for ministry and spiritual warfare. Inadequate preparation in any field of endeavor can lead to regrettable consequences, including ineffectiveness or, worse yet, defeat. On the other hand, walking through this “unseen door” can lead a believer to excellent training and preparedness for a life of fruitful service in God’s kingdom. A necessary part of this training includes helping the believer learn how to surrender his mind, heart, and will in obedience to Christ who beckons, “Come and follow me.”

10 “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17b-19, emphasis added).
11 James 2:17.
12 See John 15.
13 John 15:5.
The first stanza, then, offers one of the means by which a person may be prepared to glorify God with his life, the garden representing a discipleship group. Here, every participant is given the opportunity to grow to maturity in Christ in an environment of love, trust, and mutual support.

Second Stanza

Leave behind my familiar room, comfortably at ease,
Where programs live and studies rule, and classes never cease?
My teacher knows the truth, you see, and leads us all to gain,
No expectation e’er showered on me, the gospel without pain.
Should not I give my soul in praise each and every week,
And live content with all I know, without the lost to seek?

“Leave behind my familiar room?” The reference is to the prevalent way the church seeks to help believers grow in Christ and prepare them for kingdom service, namely, through its programs. The word *program* is primarily used in two ways in our culture today. First, it refers to “a listing of the order of events and other pertinent information for a public presentation.” Examples would be church bulletins setting forth an order for worship and playbills distributed at theaters. This meaning, of course, is not the focus of our concern.

A second definition of the word *program* is “the presentation itself.” This succinct meaning captures the primary method by which the church is still seeking to influence and train its members. Year after year, various kinds of presentations are made in multiple environments to teach or influence the targeted groups. But is this the way Jesus sought to win the world? In 1963, Dr. Robert Coleman published his book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which has been translated into over a hundred languages and touched the lives of millions. In it, Coleman, former Professor of Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Director of the Institute of Evangelism at the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois, maintains Jesus used another strategy for winning the world:

> His (Jesus’) concern was not with programs (emphasis added) to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.¹⁶

If Coleman’s words are true, then why is it that so many continue to resort to programs to make disciples? Why do so many operate out of the conviction that people change as they process and absorb the information that is presented to them, that individuals make significant, even radical, shifts in their speech and behavior when they discover truth? Again, Robert Coleman goes to the core of the issue and maintains we have not comprehended Jesus’ ways:

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¹ Believers are also prepared to love and serve God as they obediently respond to biblical preaching, partake of the sacraments, foster a rich devotional life, and prayerfully study God’s Word.


Most of the evangelistic efforts of the church begin with the multitudes under the assumption that the church is qualified to conserve what good is done. The result is our spectacular emphasis upon numbers of converts, candidates for baptism, and more members for the church, with little or no genuine concern manifested toward the establishment of these souls in the love and power of God, let alone the preservation and continuation of the work.\textsuperscript{17} It is time that the church realistically face the situation. Our days of trifling are running out. The evangelistic program of the Church has bogged down on nearly every front.\textsuperscript{18}

The individual in the poem is struggling to leave behind this “familiar room,” because he is “comfortably at ease.” And why is he at ease? “No expectation e’er showered on me.” He can participate in programs, classes, and worship services without having to do anything. He has become content with what he knows, has not established any personal goals for spiritual growth, and is not involved in kingdom service. His inactivity is a chilling reminder that it is easy to remain in an environment where little or no demands are made, to have the “gospel without pain.”

In 1966, before the collapse of Communism, Douglas Hyde, a leader of the Party in Great Britain for 30 years, wrote a book entitled \textit{Dedication and Leadership}, contrasting the Communist’s cause with Christianity.


douglas hyde, \textit{Dedication and Leadership}, p. 18.

\textit{They (the Communists) say that if you make mean (low or inferior) little demands upon people, you will get a mean little response which is all you deserve, but, if you make big demands on them, you will get an heroic response...They work on the assumption that if you call for big sacrifices people will respond to this and, moreover, the relatively smaller sacrifices will come quite naturally.}

\textit{Like attracts like. Those who are attracted by the dedication they see within the movement will themselves be possessed of a latent idealism, a capacity for dedication. Thus dedication perpetuates itself. It sets the tone and pace of the movement as a whole... If the majority of members of an organization are half-hearted and largely inactive, then it is not surprising if others who join it soon conform to the general pattern. If the organization makes relatively few demands upon its members and if they quite obviously feel under no obligation to give a very great deal to it, then those who join may be forgiven for supposing that this is the norm and that this is what membership entails.}\textsuperscript{19}

In the light of this analysis, why has the church not given up on programs? Is it because they are so effective in making disciples? Could it be that many believers have simply become attached to religious activity that has very little to do with the demands of the gospel? Pascal was right: “How tiresome it is to give up pursuits to which we have become attached.”\textsuperscript{20} Programs may be an effective way to keep people involved in the life of the church, but an ineffective way of making reproducing disciples. The mission of the church is not to take attendance, but to lead people to Christ, to help them become more godly, and to equip them to obey everything Jesus commanded.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 35.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Douglas Hyde, \textit{Dedication and Leadership} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Blaise Pascal, \textit{Pensées} (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1968), p. 79.
\end{itemize}
“Should not I give my soul in praise each and every week?” Yes, everything in our lives flows out of our corporate and private worship of the triune God. But when we “live content with all I know,” and do nothing to bring the gospel to the lost, we have abandoned Jesus’ last words: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Third Stanza

I think should I approach the door, a turn my life would take,
For I would learn my Master’s ways, and from my sloth I’d wake.
First learn how Pilgrim22 made his way, as Bunyan saw his dream,
An allegory fit for praise, a work of art it seems.
Then sit at Bruce’s23 feet a spell, a prof of old who knew
The life of Jesus with the Twelve, and how be trained a few.

“I think should I approach the door” expresses the hesitancy with which many move toward discipleship. Holding to vague notions about what the experience would be like, most believe their lives would be enriched and changed by having a personal mentor and other friends who could help them on their spiritual journey (“a turn my life would take”).

“My Master’s ways” refers to the ways of Christ. The prophet Isaiah told the people of Jerusalem and Judah: “He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.”24 How exhilarating to follow the Lord Jesus Christ! To follow him is to be fully alive (“from my sloth I’d wake”) with hope and faithful expectation.

The two books discussed in this stanza are Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan and The Training of the Twelve by A.B. Bruce, classic works from the 17th and 19th centuries, respectively, that have been used by God to transform countless lives around the world.

Fourth Stanza

Four years evokes a cry within, “Too long and much too hard!”
Yet do I not admire the oak, strong ringed within my yard?
Nature knows how power and strength, produced within the limbs,
Ne’r comes in one year’s growing, nor by magician whims.
How then, we say, can life be shaped within a month or two,
And filled with every needful thing, the Master’s job to do?

As with all worthwhile pursuits, discipleship takes time. The time required is always proportional to the desired outcomes. Becoming a journeyman electrician requires one set of standards, while becoming the commander of a nuclear submarine demands another. Jesus chose to spend approximately 3½ years with the Twelve so he could finish the work that he began with them. It must have taken that long for Jesus to train them.25

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21 Acts 1:8.
22 The main character in Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan.
23 A.B. Bruce, author of The Training of the Twelve.
24 Isaiah 2:3.
“Four years evokes a cry within” is a response of resistance. “Why so long?” one asks. Yet the poem argues that everyone understands that an oak tree takes years to grow into a pillar of strength and shade. Why, then, is it not obvious that a life cannot be “shaped within a month or two”?

Fifth Stanza

Commit I to the task at hand, prepare myself to reach God’s world,
No looking back, no cost too great, trade in all for one great Pearl.
Shun fear and failure, the liar’s voice;
‘Tis true I have no other choice.
The Father moved with mercy, see, sent man his only Son;
And loved me so that I might serve, and hear the words, “Well done.”

The final stanza reveals the submissive heart of the one responding to the call of God. “Commit I to the task at hand” is a deliberate and conscious decision to enter into the discipling process in order to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”26 and to “prepare myself to reach God’s world.” Two of Satan’s most effective weapons against believers are fear and failure, both intended to paralyze and hinder kingdom service. Christians must “put on the full armor of God”27 and silence the liar’s voice, looking unto a merciful heavenly Father for grace and strength to remain faithful in the battle. And finally, as the poem concludes, we are reminded that there is “no cost too great” in order to gain the one great Pearl and his divine “Well done.”

Concluding Thoughts

When God reached down in his mercy and gave you the free gift of eternal life through his Son, Jesus Christ, he not only forgave your sins and adopted you into his family, but also gave you a charge to be involved in reaching others who do not know him. For many, this is a frightening challenge, giving rise to deep feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. But are these fears without foundation?

Suppose you were invited to the airport one morning and told you could take a single-engine plane up for a spin by yourself but had never been trained as a pilot. You would immediately decline the offer, that is, if you valued your life. On the other hand, imagine that an invitation was extended for you to receive professional training by which you could safely fly that plane one day. If you had an inherent interest in flying, the offer would sound extremely attractive.

Similarly, if you had never received any training or equipping to do what Jesus asked you to do, wouldn’t it be appropriate to experience feelings of inadequacy and fear? Remember, Jesus spent over three years with the Apostles preparing them to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. Not one of them would have been able to carry out his commands without this personal and thorough training.

When Jesus had completed his training of the Twelve, he gave them what has become known as the Great Commission. These 50 words28 expose his heart and highlight his highest priority for reaching a lost world with the gospel.

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26 II Peter 3:18.
27 Ephesians 6:10-20.
28 In the original Greek language.
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 will be with you always, to the very end of the age.  

Commenting on this passage, A.B. Bruce, the Scottish scholar, pastor, and author, shakes us from our numb familiarity with Jesus’ words by saying,

Surely this is the language of a Divine Being. What mere man ever conceived of such a plan that would include the whole human race in its scope? Who except One who possessed all power in heaven and on earth could dare to hope for success in such a gigantic undertaking?

With straightforward candor, Dr. Bruce further exhorts all believers to consider what Jesus really expects from us if we would follow him. With integrity of heart, without distraction, without murmuring, envy, or weighing consequences,

He wants his children to think of all of his orders as wise, all his arrangements good, acknowledging his right to lead as he pleases, content to serve him in a little place or in a big one, by doing or by suffering, for a long period or a short one, in life or by death, if only he be glorified.

Carefully consider what he is saying:

- Jesus wants you to think that everything he commands is totally wise.
- He wants you to believe that everything he does is perfectly good.
- He wants you to acknowledge that he has an absolute right to lead you just as he pleases.
- He wants you to be content, whether you are serving him in a small village or in a large city.
- He wants you to serve him, even if it involves some form of suffering.
- He may want you to serve him for many years, but you might have only days or hours to live.
- He may require you to serve him by giving your life for him.
- He never wants you to lose your integrity.
- He does not want you to be distracted by the things in this world, complain about anything, or long for more than what you have.
- He does not want you to be concerned about what serving him might cost you.
- He only wants you to be concerned about glorifying him.

The Call, then, is an invitation for you to come and follow Jesus. It is a summons to “trade in your all for one great Pearl” and to “prepare yourself to reach God’s world.” It is a call for you to become the man or woman God intended for you to be.

You are not going to be asked to fly the plane on your first trip to the airport. This invitation is for ground school where you will be trained and equipped to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. During the time of your discipleship, you will be challenged to examine every area of your life in the light of the Scriptures so that you may emerge as a man or woman after God’s own heart.

32 Matthew 13:45-46.
33 “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22).
Words may emerge over time with so many connotations that the explicit, original meaning, or denotation, becomes obscure. The word *discipleship* is one of those words. Some use it to describe what takes place in what Robert Coleman calls “vague institutional programs.” These are usually church established programs initiated for the sole purpose of “getting people involved in the life of the church” and maintained with little or no expectation of lasting transformation. Others restrict the word with unnecessary limitations, forcing the idea that discipleship implies a meeting between two, and only two, people, e.g., one mentor and one pupil (called one-on-one discipleship). Furthermore, there are those who promote the notion that the core meaning of the word has to do with the content, or curriculum, studied by the learner or disciple.

As we turn to the Scriptures, however, we are confronted with some eye-opening truths about this word. When Jesus commanded the Twelve to go and *make disciples*, he simply meant that they were to go and make new converts, to share the gospel with unbelievers that they might repent and put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation. Then, as the latter part of the Great Commission informs, the disciples were to teach these new Christians to obey everything Jesus commanded them (we will refer to this as *discipling*). Note that they were not instructed to simply teach them everything, but to teach them to obey everything he commanded them. Discipleship certainly involves the impartation of knowledge, but it is much more than that. True discipleship always involves a growing obedience to the truths taught in the Word of God.

The following definition of Christian discipleship is based upon a careful study of the Gospel records that reveal how Jesus trained the Twelve, taught them how to live, and effectively prepared them for a lifetime of ministry in his name:

**Christian discipleship is a concentrated process that occurs when a mature believer prayerfully enters into a committed relationship with a group of faithful and teachable believers for the purpose of building godly character, imparting true knowledge, and developing ministry skills under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit, so that they will follow Christ without reservation and do what he tells them to do.**

*On the following two pages, you will discover further insights about discipleship as this definition is expanded and explained.*
Discipleship is a **concentrated process**. Robert Coleman emphasizes “the deliberate way that Jesus proportioned his life to those he wanted to train,” and espouses “a fundamental principle of teaching: that other things being equal, the more concentrated the size of the group being taught, the greater the opportunity for effective instruction.” He continues, “Jesus devoted most of his remaining life on earth to these few disciples. He literally staked his whole ministry upon them. The world could be indifferent toward him and still not defeat his strategy.”

A group of 5 to 8 people is an ideal size for fostering good group dynamics, but this does not mean your group could not have fewer, or more, participants.

The phrase **concentrated process** has a second implication for discipleship based on the following definition of **concentrate**: “to focus one’s thoughts or efforts.” When Jesus was approaching the end of his earthly ministry, he prayed what has become known as his “High Priestly Prayer.” Here we gain a glimpse of his thoughts about the work he had done with the Twelve: “I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given me to do.” The work he was alluding to was not his sacrificial work on Calvary’s cross, but his investment in the lives of those who would carry the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. In other words, Jesus focused his efforts on training the Twelve and was not distracted from his mission, because he was preparing them for something. He had no intention of merely satisfying curious or speculative minds. There was a mission to be accomplished and they were the men to do it. Over the course of the next few years, you will constantly be encouraged to concentrate, that is, to focus your thoughts and efforts on Jesus Christ and his will for your life.

The mentor and those being discipled should **prayerfully** enter into a discipling relationship. Before Jesus chose the Twelve as Apostles, “he went off to the mountain to pray, and spent the whole night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples to him; and chose twelve of them, whom he also named as apostles.”

Before you decide about participation, spend time with your heavenly Father and seek his will. Those who have studied small group theory and practice know from experience how often people drop out of groups when the initial decision is not based upon Divine calling.

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14 Coleman, pp. 26-27.
16 John 17.
17 John 17:4.
Effective discipleship can only take place in the context of a **committed relationship**. Everyone recognizes that, in order for a student to become a medical doctor, significant commitments and sacrifices are mandatory and include the realms of time, intellectual endeavor, and financial investment. Concert pianists spend years practicing before they perform for spellbound and applauding audiences. Likewise, it is not possible to produce mature disciples of Jesus Christ without a significant commitment on the part of the mentor and those being discipled.

In Christ-centered discipleship, you can expect to gain **character, knowledge, and ministry skills**. You will grow in your knowledge of God, his Word, and his world; increase in wisdom for daily living and decision-making; learn and refine skills for effective and fruitful ministry; practice spiritual disciplines for the development of Christ-like character; have your heart sensitized to the movements of the Holy Spirit; and gain a clearer and broader vision for your role in building the Kingdom of God.

Real life change only takes place under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit. A discipleship group that has clear mission, high commitment, and strong curriculum, but is not living under the direction of the Holy Spirit, will soon discover a growing emptiness, along with its cousin, powerlessness.

Disciples become like their teachers. Jesus said, “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.”39 It is a well-known fact that children not only pick up their parents’ good qualities and traits, but also their imperfections and weaknesses. This is also true in the context of discipleship. All mature mentors live with the ever-present reality of their own sinfulness and shortcomings before a holy God, yet humbly seek to model the gospel before others as they live by grace. Your mentor will never “have it all together.” Whereas one mentor may be strong in Scripture memory, another may sincerely struggle with this discipline. Another may excel in facilitating discussion, while another is more at ease in prayer. Always remember that your mentor is not trying to impress you with his or her own life but is seeking to point you to Christ. Even the Apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers to imitate him, but only to the degree that he imitated Christ.40 So, though your mentor will have many things to offer you, always remember that the object of your affections is Christ; and the aim of your discipleship is that you keep the First Commandment and try “to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.”41 Seek to become involved in faithfully pursuing the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. It is a well-known fact that many groups (even discipleship groups) meet for no other reason than to have their own personal needs met. Christ, however, demonstrated that discipleship was not an end in itself, but a means to reach the nations of the world with the gospel of grace.

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40 “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (I Cor. 11:1).
41 Eph. 5:10.
Fifteen Reasons Why Believers Should Be Involved In Discipleship

- It was commanded and modeled by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- It was taught and practiced by the Apostles.
- It is one of the primary and most effective means by which new believers grow to maturity in Christ.
- It is the best way to ensure that the church will be effective in its mission to evangelize the world.
- It is the only way to ensure the kingdom of God will grow exponentially.
- It exposes the unbiblical practice of elevating the clergy over the laity (clericalism) and involves all of God's children in building his church.
- It is the chief means by which one generation of believers passes the gospel to the younger generation.
- It reduces the need for expensive and ineffective programs in the church.
- It produces leaders for the church and the missionary enterprise.
- It offers the only consistent way to foster high accountability.
- It preserves the fruit of evangelistic success.
- It raises the moral quality of the church.
- It strengthens and nourishes families.
- It is personal.
- It creates an environment for careful pastoral oversight.
Abandoning a habit or practice does not necessarily indicate there is something inherently wrong with it, nor that it has lost its beneficence. An individual or institution, for instance, may be better served by retaining, or returning to, the earlier practice. Sometimes, however, the winds of change have blown so strongly over these old habits and practices that their memory has all but disappeared under the sands of time. New structures, promising the stars, rise up from the wasteland but often deliver inferior products.

Over the years, many pastors, teachers, scholars, and churches have set aside the practice of discipleship, reserving it only for those who are really committed to Christ. In its place they have added program after program until the memory of Christ’s association with the Twelve has become, at best, faded or, at worst, irrelevant. Having ignored Christ’s vision and methods for developing mature believers and equipping them to reach a lost world, they continue to offer programs that do not, and cannot, get the job done.

Historically, many organizations gradually and unintentionally shift from their original course and become something quite different in the following generations. The old is forgotten, even scorned; and the new, fully embraced and promoted. This pattern is noted in the Old Testament when a whole generation of Jewish children grew up in the days of the Judges “who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.”

Through the centuries, many churches and denominations have moved further and further away from the words and ways of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have opted rather to channel their members into safe programs that fulfill any purpose or meet any need except that expressly required of them in the Great Commission. For these, then, the idea of discipleship must seem wonderfully archaic, or strangely new.

Now is the time for the church to return to the Gospel records as an archaeologist would to an ancient site in order to rediscover how the Son of Man, in obedience to the Father, called, loved, and trained the Twelve to go into every part of the world with the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

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42 For example, Harvard University and the Y.M.C.A.

43 Judges 2:10.
Spiritual Growth
Spiritual growth occurs as we gain a greater knowledge of God – who he is and what he has done – and respond to him in obedience. Participation in a discipleship group will give you the opportunity to know Jesus Christ better and to experience the transforming power of his love, grace, and forgiveness within a loving and supportive community.

Access to a Spiritual Mentor
It is not uncommon in our day to hear Christians express deep regret over never having been discipled by a more mature Christian. Intuitively they sense they missed out by not having a personal mentor. Again, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus spoke about the relationship between a discipler and disciple when he said, “...everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.” He also modeled this truth in his life by choosing and training the Twelve. When he ascended into heaven and subsequently sent the Holy Spirit to them, they were able to continue the ministry of Jesus because they had become like their Master. Your group will be facilitated by a qualified and trained leader who is committed to the personal spiritual growth of each group member and to the preparation that is necessary for each to be effectively involved in building the kingdom of God.

Significant Friendships
Far too many people do not have loyal, open, nurturing, and lasting friendships. Discipleship groups can easily and naturally address the loneliness and isolation of our culture by becoming healthy environments in which vital relationships can be formed and strengthened for a lifetime.

Accountability
Solomon tells us: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!...A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” In the physical world, the second law of thermodynamics teaches us that everything tends towards maximum entropy (disorder). In our spiritual lives, the movement is in the same direction. The disciplines of the Christian life such as prayer, fasting, Bible reading and study, evangelism, Scripture memory, solitude, service, silence, frugality, etc. tend to run downhill. But when others hold you accountable for the way you live your life, the downward trend is checked, and you will be encouraged and strengthened.

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44 “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death” (Phil. 3:10); “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent” (John 17:3).
46 Eccl. 4:9-12.
A Master Plan for Discipleship
Some approach discipleship without any plan or goals for spiritual growth. Consequently, much of the current training is arbitrary, leaving the disciple without a blueprint for discipling the next generation of believers. During your training, however, you will be following a graduated curriculum, which, along with hands-on experience and specific ministry training, is designed to help you become a spiritual reproducer.

Spiritual Multiplication
Paul told Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” What Paul communicated to Timothy, Timothy was expected to pass on to faithful men who would be able to teach others (four generations). Spiritual multiplication can never be sustained until the four-generation cycle has been completed. Once we have received spiritual truth and understanding and are living in obedience to Christ, we are to pass it on to others. That is the essence of becoming a spiritual reproducer. The things learned in your discipleship group and practiced in your home, church, and community, are transferable. Once these truths really belong to you, you are then – and only then – able to pass them on to others.

Support
All people experience the peaks and valleys of living life on this earth. Trials, suffering, difficulties, hardships – everyone faces them to one degree or another. Your discipleship group will provide a built-in network of caring believers who are committed to seeing you through hard or challenging times.

Strengthened Family Life
Men and women transformed by Christ significantly impact their homes. Godly attitudes, behaviors, and speech spill over into the precious lives of those who live with them. The changes are welcomed, and the home transformed for the glory of God and the delight of each member of the family.

To this point, we have tried to give you a better understanding of Christian discipleship and its benefits, along with a biblical rationale for engaging in the work of making and building disciples. Now we would like to invite you to investigate a plan for discipleship48 that has been developed by the Jackson Institute.

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47 II Tim. 2:2.
48 This plan is one of many that could be used in helping believers to maturity in Christ.
The Jackson Institute was founded by John Musselman in 1991, in Atlanta, Georgia for the purpose of training leaders in the practice of making and building disciples. It is incorporated in the state of Georgia as a non-profit, tax-exempt (Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code) corporation governed by its officers and Board of Directors.

The Purpose of the Institute
To engage all we are for the glory of God.

Our Vision
To permeate the Kingdom of God with reproducing leaders.

Our Mission
The Jackson Institute fulfills its vision by contributing to the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual formation of individuals who are on a passionate quest to be welcomed, received, and acknowledged by God.

A Four-Year plan
The Institute offers a four-year plan of discipleship to help believers mature in Christ. Should God lead you to become a part of one of these discipleship groups, you would be asked to invest about an hour and a half each week in a small group of men or women who are committed to their own spiritual growth and development, and to faithful service in building and expanding the kingdom of God. Each participant is encouraged to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines; to be accountable to the other members of the group; to willingly and openly share life experiences for mutual edification and growth; to learn how to live the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit; to be involved in winning the world for Christ; and to disciple others in the words and ways of Jesus Christ.

On the following page, you will find the Jackson Institute’s core curriculum.
Year One

In year one, the primary focus is on the believer’s need to understand the true nature of the Christian life as presented in the Bible, to learn how to live the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit, to practice basic spiritual disciplines, and to develop godly relationships in an environment of mutual accountability and confidentiality.

Text: John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress

Year Two

Year two is devoted to helping believers discover, develop, and employ their spiritual gifts, capture God’s purposes for their lives, and practice key spiritual disciplines.

Texts: The Holy Spirit & His Gifts by John Musselman
Baptism & Fullness by John R.W. Stott
Man’s Chief End: God’s Glory by Thomas Watson
Entrepreneurs of Life and The Call by Os Guinness
The Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard

Year Three

In year three, participants begin a two-year, intensive study of the life of Christ. During this time, they read and study all four Gospels in order to foster a more intimate relationship with their Lord. At the same time, they learn how Jesus trained the twelve Apostles so they can practice these discipleship principles and methods with others.

Text: The Training of the Twelve by A.B. Bruce

Year Four

In the final year, the participants complete their study of the life of Christ. They are encouraged to continue to live their lives for the glory of God by bearing fruit and investing time with others who need Christian mentors.

Text: The Training of the Twelve by A.B. Bruce

On the next three pages, use your imagination and consider what could take place in your life if you wholeheartedly committed yourself to God and became involved with a small group of men or women intent on following Jesus Christ.
Imagine becoming like Christ in character and power, thereby realizing your highest ideals of well-being and well-doing. In other words, imagine being a believer…

Who longs to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

With an intense passion to know and serve God by His grace.

Who longs to meet with God every morning for Bible reading and prayer.

Who enjoys regular communion with God in prayer.

Who memorizes and meditates on God's Word.

Who worships God in spirit and in truth.

Who lives to discover and fulfill God's eternal purposes.

Who discovers and uses his/her spiritual gifts for building Christ's Church.

Who is passionate about sharing the gospel with unbelievers.

Who lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Who accepts God's blueprint for marriage.

Who desires spiritual, emotional, and physical oneness in marriage.

Who is faithful to his/her spouse.

Whose eyes and ears are guarded with all diligence.

Who is not living with secret sins.

Who loves and serves his/her family.

Who loves his/her children and offers them strong, godly leadership.

Whose spouse and children honor and respect him/her.

Who is not consumed by the love of money.
Who works with diligence, honesty, and integrity.

Who is ethical in all business decisions.

Who is not materialistic.

Who is respected and admired in the community, church, and marketplace.

Who understands that all money and resources belong to God.

Who knows what it means to be a faithful steward.

Who sacrificially gives to the work of the Lord.

A man who understands masculinity, and a woman who understands femininity, from God's perspective.

Who believes the perfect model to follow is Jesus Christ.

Who does not mask his/her feelings.

Who can share failures as well as successes.

Who believes power is perfected through weakness.

Who is approachable and accepting.

Who has learned the importance of forgiving others.

Who has been broken before God.

Who loves others.

Who is willing to serve others.

Who sees the world through the eyes of God.

Who suffers with grace and patience.

Who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit.

Who hungers and thirsts after righteousness.

Who confesses all failures and looks to Christ for forgiveness.
Now, use your imagination and try to picture a group of like-minded believers…

Who meet together weekly.

Who have different personalities and occupations.

Who challenge one another to become more like Christ.

Who study the Word of God together.

Who believe in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Who desire to be equipped to serve the Lord.

Who accept each other unconditionally.

Who hold private concerns in the strictest confidence.

Who hold each other accountable.

Who enjoy being together.

Who become close friends.

Who support one another through difficult times.

Who are open and honest with each other.

Who bear one another’s burdens.

Who faithfully pray for one another.

Who desire to do God’s will.

Who seek to lead others to the Savior.

Who love one another in Christ.

Who sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron.
All discipleship groups are not created equal. There are “good” groups and there are “bad” groups - and everything in between. The best ones are not birthed or maintained by accident nor even by the best intentions of dedicated, godly leaders. Like healthy families, effective groups operate on sound relational and structural principles that every member has embraced. This Invitation to Discipleship concludes, then, with the assumption that you do not want to squander your time participating in a group that does not carry you to greater maturity in Christ.

Excellence does not happen arbitrarily. It is forged with skill and hard work. Consider, for instance, the Shaker philosophy of furniture making: “Make every product better than it’s ever been done before. Make the parts you cannot see as well as the parts you can see. Use only the best materials, even for the most everyday items. Give the same attention to the smallest detail as you do to the largest. Design every item you make to last forever.”

How would you rewrite this inspiring philosophy if you were asked to describe the kind of group experience you would like to have? Would it be something like this?

By his grace, be the best disciple of Jesus Christ you can possibly be. Strive to please him in every respect and wholeheartedly give yourself to the others in your group. Be faithful to these friends and do what you can to help them along in their spiritual journey. Don’t just try to get by with what the others will see when you meet each week. Give the Lord your best – to the smallest detail – even when no one else is watching. Live every day with the realization that when you serve the risen Lord Jesus Christ, you are laying up treasures in heaven for all eternity.

As we approach the end of our Invitation, we would like to place before you the highest standards that are necessary for forming and maintaining a “great” discipleship group. But before we do, Dr. Ted Engstrom offers a word of caution:

Every truly worthwhile achievement of excellence has a price tag. The question you must answer for yourself is, ‘How much am I willing to pay in hard work, patience, sacrifice, and endurance to be a person of excellence?’ Your answer is important, because the cost is great. But if you are willing to be the person you were meant to be, I think you will discover that for you the sky is the limit, because each one of us is called by God to become personally involved in an act of creation. Excellence is not restricted to sex, age, race, or occupation. This means a life of excellence is for you.

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STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE FOR GREAT DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS

Purpose

- I understand and embrace the purpose for our group’s existence.
- I am deeply committed to doing my part to maintain a healthy discipleship group.
- I desire to become like Christ in character and power and am willing to allow the others in our group help me along on my spiritual journey.
- I want the others in our group to become like Christ in character and power and will do what I can to help them on their spiritual journey.
- I am committed to the biblical principle of spiritual multiplication and will seek to learn how to lead others to Christ and disciple them in the words and ways of Jesus Christ.
- I want to develop a Christian worldview and live my life for the glory of God.

Time

- I am willing to meet each week with my group to focus on prayer, spiritual disciplines, accountability, Bible study, and fellowship.
- I am willing to invest time each week in personal Bible study and prayer for my spiritual nourishment and growth.

Commitments

- **Attendance:** I am committed to being present every week unless providentially hindered.
- **Confidentiality:** I am committed to strict confidentiality and will not share information with those outside our group unless the one who shared it gives me permission.
- **Application:** I will seek to understand and apply the biblical truths I am learning each week.
- **Communication:** I am committed to both speaking and listening in our group, avoiding speaking too little (leaving the others hungry for my insights and perspectives), or too much (thereby dominating the conversation and hindering others from sharing).
- **Affirmation:** I intend to exercise unconditional love towards the others in our group and will accept them even when I disagree with them.
- **Honesty:** I will not lie or deceive the others in our group but will demonstrate integrity and honesty at all times.
- **Accountability:** I am asking the others in our group to hold me accountable for the way I live my life.
- **Availability:** I will make myself available to the others in our group as I am needed and able.
- **Prayer:** I intend to intercede in prayer for those in our group.
- **Service:** I intend to look for opportunities to serve the Lord in my home, my neighborhood, my church, my community, or wherever God sends me.
At the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, the mission and ministry of Billy Graham is clearly displayed:

My one purpose in life  
is to help people  
find a relationship with God,  
which, I believe,  
comes through knowing  
Jesus Christ.

Years ago, Dr. Graham recognized the great potential of Jesus’ plan to reach the world and thought it should be employed in the church. He was asked, “If you were a pastor of a large church in a principle city, what would be your plan of action?” He replied,

I think one of the first things I would do would be to get a small group of eight or ten or twelve men around me that would meet a few hours a week and pay the price! It would cost them something in time and effort. I would share with them everything I have, over a period of years. Then I would actually have twelve ministers among the laymen who in turn could take eight or ten or twelve more and teach them. I know one or two churches that are doing that, and it is revolutionizing the church. Christ, I think, set the pattern. He spent most of His time with twelve men. He didn’t spend it with a great crowd. In fact, every time He had a great crowd it seems to me that there weren’t too many results. The great results, it seems to me, came in His personal interview and in the time He spent with His twelve.11

Like Billy Graham, every believer needs a clear purpose and an effective strategy to do what Jesus asked him to do. Prayerfully consider whether this is the time for you to accept your invitation to discipleship. When you are ready to make your decision, call the person who extended this invitation and tell them you want to be discipled. This is a decision you will never regret.

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11 Robert Coleman, p. 120.