

# Taking Discipleship Seriously



by Timothy J. Ernst



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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*published by*



Anglican Network  
in Canada

# Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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Published by  
Anglican Network in Canada  
Box 1013,  
Burlington, ON, Canada, L7R 4L8  
Web: [www.anglicannetwork.ca](http://www.anglicannetwork.ca)  
Email: [info@anglicannetwork.ca](mailto:info@anglicannetwork.ca)

ISBN:978-1-897538-01-2

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Printed in Canada.

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## **What if**

Imagine a church community in which every person really belongs. They are shepherded by men and women who serve the community as living examples of the gospel of grace. The tenets of the Christian faith are taught in a consistent and clear pattern. The task of spiritual formation in the life of every member is seen as primary. Individuals are encouraged to aspire to become servant leaders themselves, to pass on to younger believers what they have learned. Beliefs professed in the community are lived out by all. Imperfections and struggles are obvious. Yet grace and forgiveness pervade. People feel secure and are authentic.

Increasingly, there is a growing sense of humble confidence that God is with them, demonstrating his power within the fellowship, and that His Spirit is leading them to new victories over strongholds of evil, illness and unbelief. People who take part in the communal life feel glad to be involved in it, sharing generously. The community is growing as friends bring friends into this fellowship of truth and grace.

This can be your church! It is the picture given to us in Luke's account of the early Christian community described in Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

## **It Happened!**

Between the lines of the descriptions we read this fact: they all took discipleship seriously. Paul subsequently taught and reproduced this pattern of life in other believing communities. “We proclaim him (Jesus Christ),” Paul declares, “admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour” (Col. 1:28-29).

Paul believed that Jesus’ message of redemption, conveyed as Jesus had conveyed it, person to person, would change the world. It was a startlingly simple approach that Jesus had modeled. He began by calling an undistinguished group of fishermen and small business people to join him and learn his way of life. For three years he lived with them, traveled with them, conversed with them, taught them, corrected them, trusted them, forgave them and loved them. They sometimes let him down and disappointed him, but he remained faithful to them. Later, when these disciples and others like them were empowered by the Holy Spirit, still faithfully adhering to Jesus’ pattern of life, their “faith in God became known everywhere” (1 Thess. 1:8).

This proliferation is all the more stunning as we consider the period. There were few Christian resources and no cultural advantages in following Christ, and the New Testament had yet to be written. The Christian communities typically consisted of lower class Jews and non-Jews. Yet their faith, power and commitment to discipling their converts made them an irrepressible force. In a short time, Christianity toppled all competing religious alternatives, and was embraced as the preferred religion of the Roman Empire in 312 CE.

For decades the churches in Canada, including the Anglican Church, have not taken discipleship seriously. ACC congregations are riddled with “undisciplined disciples” (Jess Moody), and many of the church’s problems are due to the ubiquitous presence and influence of these undisciplined believers.

## **What is a Disciple?**

A disciple is someone who, having counted the cost, has made it their aim to become like Jesus. Today Jesus still bids every Christian to follow his way of holiness and become like him. And before we can disciple someone else we must be disciples of Jesus ourselves. Paul equates the path of discipleship with the level of discipline a winning athlete employs in training for his sport. “Do you not know that in

a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training” (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

## **Spiritual Disciplines Explained**

Our lives are held together by a web of habits and patterns that are almost automatic. If we intend to be like Jesus, we soon discover that we need to acquire some new habits. These are called spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are routines we cultivate for a spiritual purpose. They are patterns of action we can take up that enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort. For example, fasting leads us to discover a spiritual food that sustains us; scripture memorizing allows God’s wisdom to replace our natural reactions. As these disciplines gain purchase, we begin to respond to life’s demands differently. We may notice that trusting God begins to supplant fear in our approach to the future. We might observe possessiveness being replaced by generosity. We begin to see ourselves transformed into the character of Christ. The Spirit of God will powerfully assist our meagre resources as we draw near to God in this way. But every day we must decide to continue. This disciplined journey is the path of discipleship.

The church described in Acts 2 had cultivated some important spiritual disciplines enumerated in verse 42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....” We can identify here four significant disciplines that all disciples should incorporate into their lifestyle: Scriptural intake, prayer, communal participation and evangelism.

### **• Scriptural Intake**

Disciples in the Acts 2 community submitted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, which we now have set out for us in the Scriptures. The renovation of our character is both a corporate exercise and an individual one, but facing up to Scripture is the main means of change throughout. As we yield our will to God daily, responding to what we learn from God’s written word, the Holy Spirit actively reprograms our minds. To effect this interior reconstruction he uses many materials—truth, beauty, adversity, other people etc. Most significantly, he uses the teaching of the Bible to reshape our lifestyle. Paul reminds his protégé Timothy that, “There’s nothing

like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or the other—showing us God’s truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us,” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). As we hear, read, study, memorize, “inwardly digest” and apply the Scriptures, God recasts us in the character of his Son and equips us for his service.

- **Prayer**

A second spiritual discipline we notice in the Acts 2 community is prayer. For the disciple, praying is continuous, like breathing. We pray when we are alone and when we are not. We pray when we are succeeding and when we are failing. The Bible resounds with prayers—from the elemental to the magisterial. They serve as necessary models of how we may approach the Holy God of the Universe. There are prayers of worship and adoration, prayers of confession and repentance that restore our strength and joy, prayers of thanksgiving for his daily provision, prayers for counsel and wisdom. Petitions and intercessions invite God to work in our own lives and in the lives of others as we seek to resist and overcome the doings of the devil on the earth. There will also be silent times of listening and waiting for God to speak. Prayers of all kinds increase our God-consciousness, heightening our capacity to experience and respond to him.

- **The Daily Quiet Time—Aligning Scripture and Prayer**

“Where can I go and meet God?” David sighs in Psalm 42:2. Meeting God in the Bible and in prayer is food for our soul and we should make a daily habit of it. If we only ate once a week, on Sundays, our bodies would precipitously decline into debility and sickness. ‘Personal devotions’ or the ‘quiet time’ are a means of making space in our lives in order to give the Lord our full attention. As we do, we sense his life mingling with ours. This is a time of re-experiencing the closeness of our relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus promises us that, as we abide in him, he will abide in us (John 15). In this place of focused abiding, we become especially attuned to hear the Spirit of God as we read the Bible and meditate upon the living word. Through the word the Spirit gives us the personal directions we

need for the day, to which we are then able to respond with trust and obedience.

Begin by selecting a quiet place. Become passive in God's presence. Savour his company. Ask God to speak to you in the Scriptures, his word to you. Read a chapter. Ponder the passage. Let your mind roam freely over it. Respond to God. Record in your notebook any verse that specially speaks to you. Talk to God about what you have read. Let him lead your mind into confession, thanksgiving, petition and silence. Compose a prayer of response.

You should anticipate a battle over establishing this habit. Intimate and regular communion with our God exposes us to such a high degree of life transformation that the devil and the flesh war intensely against it. "The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while conditions are still unfavourable," declares CS Lewis. "Favourable conditions never come." But think of all the other disciplines we execute every morning. We wash, have breakfast and brush our teeth. We make it to work on time. We each have the capacity to accomplish the things we set our wills to achieve. By failing to establish the quiet time as a regular discipline we hamstring our progress as disciples. We cannot impart God's life if we do not ourselves experience it constantly.

### • **Communal Participation**

Christian faith is not a solitary experience but a path of togetherness and sharing. In Acts 2:42-47; "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship.... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together." The discipline of communal participation is where disciples experience and offer to one another the love and truth of the gospel.

### • **Evangelism**

The church described in Acts 2 grew because people invited their families and friends to receive the good news about Jesus. As they responded, they experienced God's salvation for themselves, so that each could say with Paul: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," (Rom. 1:16).



Paul's defence of his faith recorded in Acts 26 offers a helpful model of how to share our experience of the gospel with others in a compelling manner. On trial, Paul offers a concise version of his faith story, recounting his life before knowing Christ and then relating his conversion experience. After gaining permission to speak, his tone is conversational, confident and respectful. He makes an appeal to King Agrippa to respond to the Christ who died for all people.

Evangelism is a spiritual discipline. It involves interceding for those around us who make up our relational network: our family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. It requires some preparation—getting our personal story straight and getting clear on the claims and appeal of the gospel. Then it is trusting God to fill us with his love and power so that we tell our story in an attitude of humility and confidence. But the discipline of evangelism is chiefly an expression of our love for Jesus. Grandparents need not take a training course on, “How to talk about your grandchild” any more than a fiancé needs a seminar to teach him how to speak of his beloved. Love finds a way to express itself! Compelled by the love of Jesus and confident of the gospel's transforming message, a disciple seeks every opportunity to show and tell this good news (2 Cor. 5).

### **Making Disciples**

Known as the Great Commission, Jesus' stirring words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,” (Matt. 28:18), establish that the highest ministry priority of our churches is discipling. If we fail to make disciples, we fail in everything. Is this challenge daunting? Absolutely. But as we go, Jesus assures us, “I am with you always” (v. 20). That makes all the difference.

### **Spiritual Parenting**

To make a disciple, one must first be a disciple. The calling to make disciples is not merely for a few elite believers. Rather it is Jesus' call to each of us to work with him in God's bold plan to reach the whole world with the gospel. What does discipling look like? Paul reminded a church community he had founded that, “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her children” and again, “like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you” (1 Thess. 2:7, 11). A suggestive way to

think of discipleship is to equate it to the art of parenting. What do good parents provide for their children? Copious amounts of personal attention and affirmation? Nutrition? Waste management? Yes. The persons we parent in Christ will need the same kind of provision from us.

Many in our churches are spiritual orphans. They lack a close relationship with a mature believer who is modeling the pattern of Christian discipleship. Every Christian needs a spiritual father or mother who will do the same: help them grow up in the faith.

When you resolve to be a disciple, the next step may be for you to find someone in your church or fellowship circle whom you respect as a parent in the Lord. Hebrews 13:7 tells us to value such leaders, to reflect on the outcome of their way of life and to imitate their faith. As you explain your desire to be a disciple they will be enthusiastic about helping you with prayer and personal support for this new stage of your journey.

Search every park in every city of the world and you will never ever see a statue of a committee. God works through individuals. As we abide in Christ, his life flows through us and makes us fruitful in our living and in our witness. When God uses us to lead others into his family, we are to disciple these spiritual infants we help bring to birth. When a believer who wants to be mentored, asks us for discipling ministry, we should not say no if we are able to say yes. Ask God to lead to you to those whom he wants you to disciple.

I will now risk being autobiographical in order to give some concrete examples of how I have responded to this aspect of the Great Commission in my own life and circumstances. I am not suggesting my approach as the only way; I simply offer some ideas that I have found fruitful over thirty years of experimentation, sometimes within the Canadian Anglican context as well as sometimes outside it.

In seeking light from God as to whom I should attempt to parent spiritually, I look for four character qualities:

- **Faithful.** Does this person keep his word? ...show up on time? ...fulfill assignments—even when they seem uncomfortable and difficult?
- **Available.** Does this person have time to be a disciple? When Jesus called his men to follow they abandoned their former occupations and surrendered their schedules to be with him.

The most precious commodity we have is our time. And God demands it. To start, I ask a person to give me three hours a week, 90 minutes to meet with me and 90 minutes to meet with God in daily quiet times.

- **Desperately serious.** God uses people who mean business. Jesus dares us to trust him at all times, and especially when things become hard and painful. Is this person thoroughly resolved to do whatever it takes to know Jesus better?
- **Teachable.** Jesus declared to his followers: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” (Matt. 18:3) He put a high value on deep humility and a childlike teachable spirit as required to unlearn old habits and acquire new ones in the pursuit of Christlikeness.

Like parenting, discipling takes time and we tend to be impatient. Don't just focus on removing warts. Meet people where they are. Initiate time with them. Get into your disciple's life. Enjoy him. Meet his family. Connect with his interests. Some of the men I disciple have joined my hockey team. Retreats, road trips and celebrations are experiences that foster friendship, deepen trust and demonstrate the life of Christ at work in you both. God's life in us is as much caught as taught.

Jesus called his disciples to a new way of life that is always out of sync with the prevailing culture. So anticipate some difficulties. We need to pay attention to the life-experiences of the person we are helping. How far are his struggles a gracious gift from God that is completing his faith and helping him become more like Jesus? For example, I mentor a man who does not enjoy his job. A continuous theme of our discussions has been: will you trust God—even if things do not improve in your workplace? Currently, my friend is bringing meaning to his job—as he learns to be thankful for it and to bless his colleagues under difficult conditions.

### **Strengthen them in God**

As we read Paul's letters to his spiritual children, we gain insight from his prayer life. He constantly interceded for them: “We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers... I was afraid that

in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless” (1 Thess. 1:2, 3:5). Expecting such opposition, we try to pray for the friends that we disciple as often as we think of them.

Our role as the discipler is to come prepared to invest something of significance in another’s life. As we pray and study the Bible expectantly through the week, God often gives us something he wants us to pass on to our spiritual children. Typically, it is a verse or concept from the Scriptures that makes for my or his benefit or both.

When David was on the run from King Saul, Jonathan sought David out and “helped him find strength in God” (1 Sam. 23:16). That is what we are trying to do in discipleship. As Jonathan met David where he was, so we must seek to meet the friends we are discipling where they are spiritually.

### **Develop a system**

An older couple at the campground couldn’t believe how quickly and efficiently a young family of five set up camp. “You folks sure do work well together,” the gentlemen complimented the younger dad. “You just need a system,” was the reply. There is nothing unspiritual about having a system in discipling, though we should trust in the Lord, not in our system. In 1 Corinthians 3:10 Paul refers to himself as an “expert builder” of people who built carefully on the foundation of Christ in their lives. Like any craftsman, he had a system. Here are five system components that I try to structure into meeting with someone I am discipling:

- Ask the Spirit to come, to reveal his wisdom and to lead in our conversation. This is an acknowledgement that without God’s favour we can achieve nothing.
- Bless the person verbally with whatever you sense to be his lack in that moment.
- Converse. Enjoy some small talk. I like to know as much about the person as he will divulge. It is in the seemingly mundane events of life that God often speaks. Hearing what life is like for the person I am mentoring gives me insight into what God’s messages might be. A good question brings a revealing answer. So be curious and listen carefully. This

is a two-way street: I share my life as well. Jesus called his disciples 'friends' (Jn. 15:13-15). In using this term he was bringing them to a higher degree of intimacy with himself. The men I mentor become my friends. They enrich my spiritual life immensely and I thank God for them.

- Deliver. I present what I have prepared. I am looking to help my friends develop Christlike character, convictions and competencies. Typically, I offer a word from the Scriptures with a clear application to their circumstances.
- Encourage. We conclude by praying together, thankful for God's Spirit guiding our time together. In praying as in talking with those you are discipling, be specific and generous with encouragement.

This, in outline, is the system I follow and recommend.

## **The Process**

Parenting someone spiritually can be slow and tough work. Progress can be notoriously difficult to measure. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, Christians travel towards Christlikeness by circuitous routes. Often the profound things God is doing in a person's life are unseen and indescribable and the fruit of our investment in that person may not be seen for years. Knowing that God is in any case the one who causes the growth helps us to relax. Of course I have made mistakes in discipling people and so will you. Still we press on, however, in the grace of our Master Jesus.

As a guide to what to do and when in the discipleship process, I use *Meeting the Mentoring Challenge* authored by my late mentor in The Navigators, Don Lawrie (available from myself at [timernst@telus.net](mailto:timernst@telus.net)). The booklet serves as a GPS offering the relationship direction. The disciple can choose the content from the menu of subjects like handling money, God's calling, claiming the promises of God and so on. Each topic has a learning objective, a doable assignment, a list of pertinent Scripture verses and some discussion questions. This is a transferable resource that your disciples can employ when they begin investing in a spiritual son or daughter in the future.

There are many helpful resources to activate in discipleship. However, we are wise to remember that the tools or the paints are

not the most important thing in the making of a masterpiece. A good tool or a good system is never a substitute for a good man or woman, a mentor who walks with God. We cannot take anyone further than we have gone ourselves, so we need to continually dig deeper into God.

### **Born to Reproduce**

Paul instructs his protégé, Timothy, “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). Notice the four generations Paul references in this verse. In our discipling we must think ahead. I regularly remind the person I mentor of the generations that will emerge as he disciples another to disciple yet another. I ask him: “How will you teach this to the person you disciple?” The question reminds the individual of his critical role in raising up future generations. Under normal circumstances human beings grow up and reproduce. Similar, healthy Christians are meant to mature spiritually and reproduce spiritual children.

I am passionate about discipling because it is the story of my life. Were it not for a ‘Paul’ who came alongside me as a young Christian and gave me a vision bigger than pleasing myself, I suspect that I would not be in the church today. I agree wholeheartedly with the apostle Paul: the men I have disciplined over my life are “my glory and my joy” (1 Thess. 2:20). I stand with the apostle John who declares that he has no greater joy than to see those spiritual children continuing to walk in the truth (3 Jn. 4).

### **Our Times. Our Response**

“The New Testament is a book about disciples by disciples and for disciples of Jesus Christ” (David Watson) It shows discipling to be Christ’s plan for the world. Brilliant in its simplicity, this plan is the one approach most churches have neglected. Instead we have reports, commissions, conferences, seminars, missions, crusades and liturgical reforms, while attention to understanding and promoting discipleship is simply not given. Thus, Canadian churches are populated by many pew sitters who have never led a person to Christ or equipped another for health and growth in the faith. Discipleship has neither been explained, nor modeled, nor expected. How far we have drifted

from the model of a discipling community like the one depicted in Acts 2!

I have seen a few individuals, committed to being and making disciples, change the ethos of Anglican churches. As we learn to focus on making disciples rather than on maintaining church decorum, the work of such men and women can profoundly affect our churches in redemptive ways. Like the church in Acts 2 we might experience a new sense of devotion to God and one another, an expectation of his miraculous presence among us and a sense of joy as we witness his power. And our congregations will grow in every sense as we reproduce more and more disciples of Jesus.

The current convulsions the Anglican Church of Canada is enduring might be traced, in part at least, to the fact that the church has lost sight of its original mandate to produce disciples of Jesus Christ. Have we become distracted from the hard work of spiritual formation by feel-good programs, and sermons and celebrations that avoid presentation of the transformative faith in Christ of the New Testament? If Canadian Anglicans will become like children and relearn the meaning of the gospel and discipleship, become disciples and mentor others to be disciples, the church in Canada would be transformed. It has happened before. I believe God is pressing on us the question, will we walk and pray so that it might happen again.



## **Questions for Study and Discussion**

- 1 How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- 2 Do you agree that all Christians are called to be both disciples and disciple-makers? Why or why not?
- 3 What can we do to ensure that churches emphasize the importance of discipling as a part of every disciple's life?
- 4 What help should churches give to equip their members for a discipling ministry?
- 5 Evaluate the "system" for one-on-one discipling sessions that this book suggests. Can you see ways of improving it?
- 6 How should we disciple our children?