

Disciple Making — A Life on Life Approach

Teaching facts is simple. But shaping the heart is what Christianity is all about. It requires intimate relationships.

BY ROGER FLEMING

Silence. Deafening silence. The Jews languished under the severest judgment by the God of Abraham. He had spoken frequently, fervently by the prophets during the devastation of their land by Assyria and Babylon. He had urged them through Haggai to complete the Temple once He brought them back from captivity. But when the unrepentant nation had refused His messenger, Malachi, God fell silent. The frightful famine Amos foretold blighted Israel — a famine of hearing the Word of God (Amos 8:11,12). Four hundred years of silence.

When at last God spoke again an incredulous nation struggled for faith. There walked among them One whose Life dumbfounded them, One who spoke with authority, not as their scribes. "The *Word* became flesh and *lived* for a while among us" (Jn. 1:14). God spoke with a Life.

And this One, full of grace and truth, called Twelve to His side to be with Him, to share His Life, to discover His heart and mind, that He might send them out as His emissaries (Mk. 3:14). He trained them Life on life.

JESUS MADE DISCIPLES BY HIS LIFE

One does not teach faith and love with words alone. Disciples' hearts cannot be set on fire by theories. Fire kindles fire; iron sharpens iron; faith calls forth faith; life begets life.

Multitudes heard His words but only this circle saw Him walk on water and command a legion of demons; beheld Him transformed in supernatural radiance on a mountain top; witnessed Him sweat blood in a garden. Multitudes heard testimonies of those He healed, but only a small circle saw His love in the way He touched a leper or drew a blind man away from the crowd. Thousands enjoyed a feast on the mountain ignorant of all that passed between the Teacher and His pupils who served them.

His words often confused this hardy band of followers, but His Life discomfited and even offended them. Not only would He go through Samaria, but also He would talk privately with a "wicked" woman of that race. He joined tax collectors and other low life at their tables and seemed intent on offending all religious officials. He put off dignitaries and received children.

And it was His *Life* that convinced them of the truth of His words. Even when they did not understand what He said, they continued to follow Him, convicted by all they had heard and seen, that Jesus Christ had the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:69).

On the eve of His crucifixion, He could say to the Father, "I have made Your name known to them... they have received Your words...they have obeyed Your word... now they know...." Three years of Life-on-life involvement turned His words into deep personal conviction born out of their experiences with Him (cf. Jn. 17:6-8).

God with us. The Life of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, served as a living pattern to shape His disciples so that His astonished enemies observed that these unlettered, ordinary men who stood so boldly before them had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). No textbook gave these men such courage. They had carefully observed their Master's Life (1 Jn. 1:1) and now by the power of His indwelling Spirit they imitated Him.

The Bible studiously avoids our Western concept of education in matters of true discipleship. God schools His people in the context of ordinary, and sometimes extraordinary, circumstances of life.

Jesus radically transformed concepts held by the Twelve about God, about Himself, about His Kingdom, about His message. He drew them after Him in a fast-paced, demanding work where they could watch Him deal with nature and demons, and with people from every station in life. He gave them jobs to do and problems to solve. He pushed them to the limits of their endurance (Mk. 6:30-56) and drew them aside for periods of reflection and rest (Mk. 7:24). He led them into deepest sorrow (Jn. 16:20-22) and then, at last, they shared an incomparable joy together in an upper room.

They learned their lessons in open air classrooms surrounded by filthy beggars, mutilated lepers, thronging multitudes, and malicious officials. Always they fastened their attention on Jesus to see what He would do. Later their own lives reflected His.

MAKING DISCIPLES JESUS' WAY

My own growth in discipleship is marked by people whose lives spoke to me of Jesus Christ. I don't know all that shaped them but I know how close association with them served to mold me into the person I am today. One person who had such an impact on my life was Ken, whom I met for the first time when we were both freshmen in college. Often, when I wanted to compliment someone's character, I would say he reminded me of Ken. For several years I observed Ken from a distance. He stood for every fine quality I longed to possess myself and thought every person should have. But it was not until our senior year living together in the fraternity that the secret of Ken's life became evident to me. His presence affected all of us in the house. He was the only person I knew who openly professed Christ. He was the living picture of what I thought a Christian should be, *before* I surrendered my heart to Christ.

When Ken spoke to me of a daily devotional life, of prayer, of Bible study, it made perfect sense, because he lived what he encouraged me to do. He did not tell me I ought to witness. It was obvious just from watching him that Christians share their faith quietly, sensitively, prayerfully. His integrity and goodness, his values and choices, owed their quality to a carefully disciplined walk of faith.

Several months later we graduated and parted company. While other Christians encouraged me along the way, it was over two years later before God gave me another model like Ken.

Cecil Davidson, a Navigator staff member, opened his home to me and other servicemen like me. He was God's choice to be my new mentor, model, and guide into a life of discipling others.

TEACHING SERVANTHOOD BY EXAMPLE

I spent most of my off-duty weekends for two years in his home learning — learning what a Christian marriage looks like, how a Christian father trains his children, what values are truly important, how to manage finances. I learned from him what it meant to give myself to others in love, how important each person is, of God's sovereign power, of forgiveness and loyalty, of standards of excellence, of sensitivity to others, of patience, of the importance of inner conviction, of practical help instead of strong challenge. And what I learned came not so much from Cec's words as from watching him *live* what I learned.

Once we arrived a few minutes early for a meeting at the church and found the room in disarray from previous users. Cec set to work arranging chairs, placing song books, and setting up the podium area. It would have been embarrassing to have stood and watched, so I joined in. When the crowd arrived along with those in charge, Cec's work permitted the meeting to begin without confusion or delay. Yet no one knew that an alert and willing leader had set the stage for a successful meeting. I soon discovered this was typical of the man. I cannot imagine how the spirit of a servant could be taught in a classroom, yet Jesus prized that above most qualities we could name. Our Lord came among us as a servant and insisted His followers exhibit the humility of servanthood in all their relationships (Lk. 22:24-27). But Cec was a true servant of God, and his *life* showed me what servanthood is.

However imperfectly I responded, Cec left an indelible mark on me. A few days ago we hosted overnight guests from a visiting church group. As I stood at the window with my morning coffee, enjoying the brightening sky, I noticed the windows of their van were heavily fogged with morning dew. "Cec would clean those windows." The thought intruded into my quiet contemplation. It took only a few minutes, but enabled our company to go safely on their way with clean windows. It was over 20 years ago that Cec patiently coached me to become more alert to others' needs. There was ample opportunity, though: Cec hosted overnight guests every weekend.

How well I remember "serving" a young officer by making his bed — all the while grumbling about his thoughtlessness and pride. When he repeated his offense the following weekend I complained to Cec. He listened patiently and then calmly suggested I make his bed. That lesson stuck. But I could accept his counsel because I knew his life — he would have made that bed cheerfully with no comment as often as necessary.

Cec also granted me opportunities to learn from Navigator leaders who came to visit — by serving them. Rod Sargent came for a meeting with the Navy fleet chaplains to discuss Navigator work. Rod needed someone to handle the audio-visual equipment for his presentation and I was delighted to help out.

When Rod finished his overview he opened the floor for questions. Two senior chaplains were particularly uncomplimentary and acrimonious in their remarks. I was seething with indignation at their words. Someone needed to set them straight about our ministry! But Rod's soft, godly response left me chagrined at my own attitude. The way he handled their comments transformed the spirit of that meeting. Animosity gave way to appreciation and cooperation. God taught me the power of a soft answer by that experience.

LIFE-ON-LIFE IN THE FAMILY

Perhaps the most wonderful opportunity for life-on-life discipling is the family unit. We are disciples of our homes, for good or ill. A stable, godly couple who follows Jesus Christ is likely to produce succeeding generations of the same

kind. God's final word to His people through Malachi called them to repent of their unfaithfulness in marriage so succeeding generations might be godly.

Of all the lessons I learned from Cec nothing compares with what I learned about being a Christian husband and father. Yet Cec never gave me one verbal lesson on the subject of the Christian home. Every day I spent in his home contained more lessons than I could grasp. For a young man whose parents had divorced and who grew up without a father Cec's modeling was invaluable to me.

I never knew meal times could be fun, enjoyable, and stimulating. While I was growing up I always came to the table after everyone else had begun, wolfed down my food, and left before anyone had finished. But Cec led us into stimulating conversation, had us tell about our day, shared jokes and riddles, and played mind games. I looked forward to meals for fellowship which often continued right through the clean-up chores. And I regretted times when I had to miss them.

Years later guests in our home made an interesting comment about our meal times: "For you, food is incidental to the meal. You come together to enjoy fellowship." Now where did that come from?

One experience had a profound impact on me. The sweat rolled down my back and I fidgeted uneasily while under my breath I pleaded with Cec's son to give in. This was the fourth time Cec had brought him downstairs from the bedroom to apologize to his sister. He stubbornly refused. Back upstairs they went — seven times. My relief was unbounded when the boy at last apologized.

Cec wasn't angry or impatient. He was gentle and kind. But his kindness was married to a stern insistence that this young boy yield to his father's will. How different that was from the only discipline I remember receiving as a boy, inconsistently dealt out in angry shouts that couldn't bend my will.

The second thing I noticed was the change that came over Cec's son. He was a happier, more willing child after that. Today he's a grown man, a godly man like his father. My own children are on their way to adulthood as they pass through their teen years. Much of the best of our home they have experienced lies in lessons Cecil Davidson never preached to me. He lived them to me, life on life.