

Can You Make Disciples Without Accountability?

BY C. ANDERSON

C. Anderson is an experienced field practitioner and leader. The past 27 years, she served in Asia with YWAM Frontier Missions. Anderson trains and coaches both international and indigenous church planters toward the launching of Disciple-Making Movements. She blogs weekly about DMM related issues at Dmmsfrontiermissions.com. Other articles on member care, language learning, visa stress, etc. are available at missionarylifef.org. Her 30-day devotional for church-planters, *Faith to Move Mountains*, can be purchased on amazon.com.

"My job is to honestly preach the Word, not to hold people accountable," said the slightly defensive Christian leader to my friend. It is a common perception among us pastors. A hands-off approach lets us off the hook. We say things like; "I will do my part, God will do His." Or "Everyone has free will. Our job is to give them the gospel (information), they choose what they want to do with it."

There is truth to these statements. Where we go wrong is when we label the above as discipleship. Is the idea of "live and let live," a biblical approach to discipleship? Is a "you do you" worldview taking precedence over living and ministering like Jesus?

It's not easy to hold people accountable for obeying Jesus' words. Rather than hearing, knowing, and being able to say the right Christian things, God calls us to be doers of His Word (James 1:22).

I sometimes struggle to be accountable, even to myself. I set goals that are quickly thrown out. New Year's resolutions are forgotten by the second or third week of January. If we can't hold ourselves accountable, how can we hold others accountable for obedience? There are no easy, pat answers.

Friendly Accountability

I choose to use the term "friendly accountability." Our efforts to call to obedience must not be heavy-handed. Disciple-making should be friendly and based on relationships of love and safety. This friendly accountability, however, is critical to seeing a movement grow deep and fast. It is biblical. It was how Jesus made disciples. Let's dig a bit deeper.

Engaging Crowds vs. Making Disciples

When Jesus taught the crowds He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Our Lord didn't preach many sermons. When He did, it was up to those who heard Him to decide if they wanted to put those things into practice. The same was true when He told short stories or parables. People chose to follow and learn more...or not.

When engaging a crowd, it's tough to provide accountability. If you are preaching to 3,000 it is humanly impossible to know how they are applying your messages. This has never been more true. Many Christians are listening and learning through podcasts, online services or sitting in a large auditorium listening to a professional preacher. This is becoming not only Western but a global trend. We need to be careful not to mistake what is happening in those contexts for discipleship.

Teaching and preaching are not the same as disciple-making. They can be a part of the big picture of a person's spiritual growth, no doubt. They do not replace the vital task of making disciples. Without disciple-making, we cannot fulfill the Great Commission. And without accountability, disciples will not be made. Disciple-making requires deep, close-up relationships of trust, vulnerability, and safety.

Where Did Jesus Invest Most of His Time?

Pastoral ministry today focuses on preparing a weekly 30-40 minute highly professional, polished speech. If you get that right, you'll draw crowds. Oh, and don't forget: you also need to know how to manage social media, create a platform and hire a top-notch worship leader who can pull together a quality band. As lead pastor you manage all of this, much like the CEO of a company does.

This is not necessarily the way we aspire to do ministry. At times it feels as if we have little or no choice. If we don't do this, how will we fill the pews

and get people to pay their tithes and offerings? It seems to be what people want and expect. Is there a different way?

Even as we supposedly pursue Disciple Making Movements, these pressures and mindsets easily slip in. We must look to Jesus and how He worked. Where did He invest time? Was it in running programs, managing staff, creating His persona and platform, and fine-tuning the delivery of His speeches?

Jesus invested the majority of His time in two things: interacting with lost people and training His disciples. I wonder why we don't follow His example.

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Train Them To Do What You Do

The topic of this article is friendly accountability in disciple-making, so we won't look too much more here at how Jesus interacted with the lost. Suffice it to say that He did. He spent much time with them. Most of His miracles, parables and ministry were focused on reaching lost people. He went out among them, walked with them, visited them in homes, met them in the marketplace and called them to follow Him.

After they started following Him, what did He do? He trained them to do what He did. Jesus invested in deep relationships, long conversations, and took His disciples with Him to watch, learn and participate in what He was doing.

How often do we bring someone along with us? Because much of our "ministry" is writing emails, creating sermons and doing administration, it's not that easy to "bring someone along." If we want to make disciples, we need to change what we put our focus on. We must find ways to develop and mentor, to let others watch, then assist us. Then we can send them to go and do on their own, reporting back.

Model For Training Disciple-Makers

In Luke chapters 9 and 10, Jesus sent out the disciples to the surrounding villages. They were to go ahead of Him to prepare the way. They were to look for Persons of Peace and to heal the sick and cast out demons. Afterward, they were to return to Him and give a report. In doing this, Jesus provided a model for us of how to train disciple-makers.

Jesus first showed them how to do these things. The twelve followed Him, watching Him heal the sick and cast out demons. They saw Him minister peace and hope to those He met.

The time came when they needed to stop watching and start doing it themselves. Jesus then sent them out.

At what point do we send people out? Let it be sooner, rather than later. We wait far too long to invite people to go and do. If obedience-based disciple-making is our practice, it involves much sending. We train a little and send a lot.

Disciple-Making Approaches Multiply Trainees

After the disciples returned and reported back, they were sent out again in greater numbers. One would assume that some of those who went in Luke 10 (the 72) had come to follow Christ as a result of what had happened in Luke 9. Take note. The multiplication of committed disciples is taking place, not only of crowds.

Jesus calls them to deny themselves (Luke 9:23-26 and 57-62) and to a higher level of accountability to proclaim the kingdom to others.

Five Problems With Our Current Discipleship Model

1. We are afraid to call people to become disciples.

Jesus wasn't. He boldly confronted the casual follower who proclaimed allegiance. "I will follow you wherever you go," they said. Jesus answered by making clear the cost involved in becoming His disciple.

Our Lord didn't try to make it easy. He wanted potential disciples to count the cost. Our focus so often is on church attendance. It is the metric used to measure success. When we use that as our standard, what people do with what they hear is

not our concern. This must change. Jesus' kingdom is not made up of church adherents or Instagram followers. It is built on committed disciples of Christ who walk in obedience to His commands and are consistently growing in their allegiance to Him.

If we call people to be accountable, to actually "put into practice" what Jesus taught, some may leave. They might not like us or come to our church anymore. This is a risk we must be willing to take to obey Christ's command to make disciples of all.

2. The church-building-based model lends itself to walk-in, walk-out Christianity.

In pre-covid days, mega-churches provided the perfect place for a casual Christian to feel comfortable. You could go to church, park in the parking lot, slip in, sit in the back few rows of a darkened auditorium, slip out, and go for lunch. You barely needed to do more than greet the greeters at the door.

Post-covid (can we even say that yet?), it's even worse. Online sermons suffice. You can even skip the worship if you want and go straight to the message (or vice-versa). I'm not accusing, just stating the facts about our current situation.

In our "new normal" where does disciple-making happen? We walk in and do our weekly Christian duty, and walk out emotionally stirred or entertained, but with no accountability to apply what we have heard. Sadly, this model, so common in the West, has been exported across the globe. It is having devastating effects on discipleship. We must rethink our models if we want to see movements multiply. Resist the influence of the models around you and look to Christ's example.

3. We don't make time to model ministry and train disciples.

Seminary and Bible college training has been focused on knowledge more than ministry skills—including disciple-making. If you know the right thing you will be able to do the right thing, we assume. It's not so. Again, this model of training ministers has influenced Christianity worldwide.

Jesus trained His disciples up close and personal. They walked with Him, talked with Him, ate with Him, and joined Him in healing the sick, casting out demons and proclaiming God's kingdom to the lost.



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Christian clergy, myself at times included, are too busy with ministerial duties to train disciples this way. We settle for something less...the transfer of knowledge. How do we change?

Is there a young person you could invite to walk, talk, eat and do ministry by your side? A new believer you could show how to share their testimony with a person at the gas station? Then perhaps you could ask them to go share with the next person they meet while you watch, pray and encourage? Let's get out of the classroom transfer of knowledge and train disciples to obey Christ.

Are there times when you would normally teach, that you could instead practice ministry skills with those you are training? Or perhaps open the door for others to teach part of the lesson/message rather than being the "sage on the stage" all the time?

Those who see Disciple Making Movements (DMMs) are those who learn to train, not only teach, their disciples.

4. The emphasis is not on the priesthood of all believers, nor our responsibility to train all to minister.

This cannot be overstated or too often repeated. We must train all to reach all. Every Jesus follower must grow in confidence and competence in disciple-making. Why? Because Jesus' command is for all who follow His way. It's not only for us as ordained clergy.

We get stuck in an Old Testament pattern of operating. The clergy/laity divide is almost as strong today as the separation between Levites and ordinary Jews was in the Old Testament. Jesus came to change that, to establish a New Covenant. Let's embrace and operate in a New Testament



What is one key thing you can do this week to increase the level of friendly accountability in the way you make disciples?

understanding of the priesthood of all believers. That means we have a responsibility to pass on what we know to others, to develop and make room for the practice and exercise of their spiritual gifts.

In DMMs, every believer is given opportunity and responsibility. Because groups and churches meet in homes or shops these groups are small. Everyone gets a chance to talk, to pray, to interact with Scripture. They exercise their spiritual gifts and are constantly stretched to trust God to release those gifts to them.

5. Friendly accountability is essential, but how do we get there?

Turning the tide is difficult. Our Christian culture is strongly established. We have trained people to sit in pews, to be entertained rather than teaching them to obey. Because we don't expect application from those we teach, we don't get it. Seriously, when you preach a sermon, what percentage do you expect to even remember it a week later? Let alone apply it and pass it on to others? It may be difficult, but we have to start somewhere. The ship has to turn.

Suggestions for Turning Our Discipleship Model Around

Following are a few ideas for how we could *begin* to turn what we have called discipleship into effective, multiplicative disciple-making.

A. Find two new believers or young people and commit to spending time with them regularly.

Look for ways to invite them into your life and home. Open doors for them to minister beside you. Take them along when you visit a neighbor or relative's house. Let them watch you start a spiritual

conversation or initiate prayer for someone who is sick. Show them how to do the work of the ministry, rather than just teaching them more about it.

B. Teach, preach and train with accountability.

I am blessed to be from a wonderful church in Minnesota. Our pastor uses the phrase "Now what?" with each message. There is a built-in application. I love this! The only thing missing is the accountability loop.

The following week, before starting into a new topic, we'd see more obedience if we started by sharing with our neighbor what we did with last week's "Now what?" Then, if only a handful had applied it, maybe the message should be repeated rather than going on with more head knowledge that hasn't been put into practice. That would be discipleship, not just preaching.

C. Develop places for safety and experimentation in ministry.

Cultivate small group life and community in your church or DMM. Train group leaders to share their struggles in vulnerability and humility. Model this yourself. Find a way to make it safe to be authentic, while also upholding a culture of accountability to obedience.

In disciple-making groups, be they DBS or T4T style groups, everyone is heard and everyone learns together. These groups only work well if there is safety. Accountability to applying and sharing the story or passage must be there, but it has to feel safe to say, "I didn't share with anyone this week." This can be tricky.

One of the best ways to do this is to be accountable as the leader. When you fail, be honest about it, and ask for prayer to go do better next week. Demonstrate that you are obeying, sharing, and being transformed by God's Word. As you do this, others will follow.

We started this article with the question. *Can you make disciples without accountability?* I hope you found an answer. Answers are not what we need, however. We need to go and do things differently.

What is one key thing you can do this week to increase the level of friendly accountability in the way you make disciples? 