



Getting the Most from *Discipleship Essentials*

What would happen to the church of Jesus Christ if a majority of those who claim to follow Christ were nurtured to maturity through intimate, accountable relationships centered on the essentials of God's word? Self-initiating, reproducing disciples of Jesus would be the result.



Discipleship Essentials is specifically designed to implement small, reproducible discipleship units. The vision that stands behind this tool is an ever-expanding, multi-generational discipling network. This tool brings together three elements which creates the climate for the Holy Spirit to bring about accelerated growth.

The first element is the unchanging truth of God's Word. We have moved into a post-Christian era in the Western world. Previously, when Christendom reigned, it was generally assumed that there was such a thing as a "revealed" truth or at least scientific, objective truth that was true for all. But now in these post-Christian times relativism prevails, especially in the realm of morals and lifestyles. "Live and let live" is the byword that reflects today's highest value—*tolerance*. It is assumed that all lifestyles and moral convictions are equal, because all truth is personal. In the midst of this morass of relativism, each of these twenty-four chapters is built around a "core truth" that is true for all, because the source of this truth is a God who is the same for all.

For many, the Christian life seems like a mishmash of disconnected tiles. We have pieces of truth collected from sermons, private study, the wisdom of fellow believers, insightful books and so on. Yet we have not put them together so that they together tell a coherent story. One person who used this material in a discipleship group said it was like seeing the empty spaces of a mosaic being filled in, so that she could now see the complete picture of the Christian life and message. The lessons are sequentially laid out so that there is logical flow and tiles are connected.

Yet for the truth of God's Word to be released in its transforming power, it must be pursued in the context of trusting, intimate and lasting relationships.

The second element in the Holy Spirit's laboratory is transparent relationships. The individual has replaced the family or community as the basic unit of our society. Serial and discarded relationships mark our era. The prevailing philosophy is personal fulfillment based upon what feels good or right for me now. Many have not even witnessed the health of long-term, loving commitment. At the core of every human being is the desire for deep and satisfying relationships because we are created in the image of God. God made us for relationship with himself and with one another. A small discipleship group is a place to learn how to intimate and self-revealing in a safe



place over time. What we will ultimately have when all is said and done is the people we love.

Transformation occurs when we grapple with the truth of God's Word in the context of transparent relationships. It is a biblical axiom that the Holy Spirit will have free sway in our lives to the extent to which we open ourselves up to one another. Honesty with God is not sufficient. We give God permission to reshape our lives when we risk self-revelation and confession to others. We can't grow in Christ by ourselves. We are people made for community.

There is a *third element that creates the climate for transformation—mutual accountability*. Accountability is taking the relational context of discipleship to another level. Accountability means giving your discipling partners authority to call you to keep the commitments you have made to one another. You will convene your discipling relationship around a mutual covenant (see p.14). A covenant is a shared agreement whereby you clearly state your mutual expectations. In so doing you are giving each other permission to hold you to your agreement.

In summary, when the truth of God's Word is at the heart of self-revealing, intimate relationships rooted in mutual accountability, you have the ingredients for Spirit-motivated transformation. This tool provides the structure for these three elements to come together. Add to this discipling unit a vision for equipping followers of Jesus to pass on the faith from one generation to the next, and you have the components to renew a ministry from the bottom up.

CONTEXTS FOR DISCIPLING

Discipling in the minds of many has become associated with a one-on-one, teacher-student relationship. In writing *Discipleship Essentials* I experimented with this material in a number of contexts. Up to that point my discipling paradigm had also been one-on-one. In addition to this traditional approach I led a threesome called a *triad* and a discipleship group of ten. I was startled by the difference in dynamics. I have come to see groups of three or four as the optimum setting for making disciples.

Why do I believe that a triad or quad to be superior to one-on-one? (1) The one-on-one sets up a teacher-student dynamic. The pressure is upon the discipler to be the answer person or the fountain of all wisdom and insight. When a third person is added, the dynamic shifts to a group process. The discipler can more naturally make his or her contribution in the dynamic of group interchange. (2) Triad discipling shifts the model from hierarchical to relational. The greatest factor inhibiting those who are being disciplined to disciple others (multiplication) is the dependency fostered by one-on-one relationships. The triad/quad, on the other hand, views discipleship as a come-alongside relationship of mutual journey toward maturity in Christ. The hierarchical dimension is minimized. (3) The most startling difference between one-on-one and threes or fours is the sense of "groupness." The sense of the Holy Spirit's being present in our midst occurred much more often in the group versus the one-on-one. (4) There is wisdom in numbers. The group ap-

proach multiplies the perspectives on Scripture and application to life issues, whereas one-on-one limits the models and experience. By adding at least a third person there is another perspective brought to the learning process. The group members serve as teachers of one another. (5) Finally, and not to be minimized, by adding a third or fourth person who is being equipped to disciple others, the multiplication process is geometrically increased.

You might ask, if three is better than two, why isn't ten better than three? The larger the group, the more you water down the essential elements that make for transformation. (1) *Truth*—Learning occurs in direct proportion to the ability to interact with the truth, which becomes more difficult with an increased number of voices contributing. It also becomes increasingly difficult to tailor the rate of learning to the individual, the larger the size of the group. (2) *Transparent relationships*—Self-disclosure is integral to transformation, and openness becomes increasingly difficult in direct proportion to the size of the group. If we are not free to divulge our struggles, then the Spirit will not be able to use the group members to effectively minister at the point of need. (3) *Mutual accountability*—The larger the group, the easier it is to hide. Accountability requires the ability to check to see if assignments were completed, or commitments to obedience were maintained. Greater numbers decrease access to a person's life.

ROLE OF THE DISCIPLER

Discipleship Essentials can be used in a number of contexts (personal study, one-on-one, one-with-two or a discipleship group of ten), but whatever the context the key person is the discipler. Tools don't make disciples. God works through disciples to model life in Christ for those who desire maturity. Simply covering the content violates the intent of this tool. The tool is a vehicle which helps create the context and provide content for disciplers who want to invest themselves in love and commitment to growing disciples. The tool raises the issues of discipleship, but the discipler embodies the principles in life patterns and convictions. Modeling will be where the real instruction occurs. Remember Jesus' words, "Everyone when he is fully taught will be *like* his teacher" (Luke 6:40 RSV).

The most recent studies in secular education reveal that modeling is still the most significant learning dynamic. Neither coercion nor rewards shape human behavior as much as a "motivated attempt to resemble a specific person."¹ The lowest level of learning is compliance when one individual has control over another. The second level is identification. Influence is maintained because of a desire to remain in a satisfying relationship. Internalization is the third and highest step, for the desired behavior has become intrinsically rewarding. Modeling creates an atmosphere that affects values, attitudes and behavior.

Some of the specific roles a discipler will carry out are as follows:

1. The first and key role of the discipler is to issue an "invitation to accountable relationship."

The commitment is described and the covenant is signed (see p. 14 for “The Disciple’s Covenant”). The discipler becomes the “keeper of the covenant.” The discipling process should not commence until the invited disciple has prayed over and signed the covenant of commitment. Without the covenant there are no mutually agreed-upon standards for accountability.

The action pages in *Discipleship Essentials* are the tools for facilitating this accountability role. After lessons eight (p. 80) and sixteen (p. 146) you are asked to review the original covenant and re-covenant together. An action page after lesson twenty (p. 184) asks you to prayerfully consider who will be your discipleship partners for the next leg of journey in order to continue the discipleship chain.

2. Initially, the discipler is the group convener and guide. The lessons are laid out in such a way that the discipler simply walks the partners through the discussion format. Approximately one-quarter to one-third of the way through the discipling process, the members rotate the task of guiding the weekly format, as a way to equip and prepare for leadership of the next generation.


3. The discipler prepares the assignments of *Discipleship Essentials* just as the disciples do. Even though the discipling appointment will be guided by questions asked by the discipler, the guide shares his or her own responses to the discovery questions in the natural flow of conversation.


4. The discipler models transparency by sharing personal struggles, prayer concerns and confession of sin. The discipler does not need to have all the answers to biblical and theological questions. Feel free to say, “I don’t know, but I’ll try to find the answer or let’s research this together.” The power of modeling is not dependent upon a false perfectionism. The discipler will gain as much insight into Scripture and the Christian life as those who are being disciplined for the first time.


SUGGESTED STUDY FORMAT


Though *Discipleship Essentials* is twenty-five sessions, I would not expect that you could cover the assignment in twenty-five weeks. The relationship is always primary. Just plowing through the lessons would violate the spirit of this type of group. Every group will vary in length according to your style of learning, the depth of personal matters you are sharing at any given time and the detours you take to pursue issues raised by the study. Remember that the idea behind a small, tailored discipleship group is to proceed at the pace that is comfortable for the participants. Don’t feel obligated to cover every question, but use this book as a menu from which to select, especially if some of the material is familiar and already incorporated in your life.

The assignments are to be completed individually in their entirety prior to the discipling appointment. Each lesson contains discussion guides specifically designed for each of the following elements:

 **Core Truth**—The core truth serves as the nugget around which each lesson is built. The rest of the chapter is designed to further clarify the central focus. Begin each lesson with a review of the core truth’s question and answer.

 **Memory Verse**—When we commit the Bible to memory, God’s viewpoint on life slowly becomes ours. The psalmist writes, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). This discipline helps us grow to be more like Christ as we are grounded in his truth, encourage other believers with God’s Word, and share our faith with others. These verses should be reviewed approximately every sixth lesson.

 **Inductive Bible Study**—The place to discover reality from the only perspective that counts is the Bible. We are not interested in stowing away truth as if we were simply trying to acquire more knowledge. The object of this Bible study is to encounter reality and then through God’s power bring our lives in line with it. Larry Richards has summarized well the reality structure of God’s Word: “That is, in the Word of God the Spirit of God has revealed the true nature of the world we live in, the true nature of man and of God, the ultimate consummation of history, the pattern of relationships, and response to God and to life which corresponds with ‘the way things really are.’”²

 **Reading**—Each lesson concludes with a teaching printed in the guide. This reading is intended to provide a contemporary discussion of the eternal core truth that will challenge our lifestyle and stimulate our thinking. The follow-up questions will help make the learning concrete.

Weave prayer through all that you do. Begin by acknowledging Christ’s presence through the Holy Spirit, and open your lives to what he may desire to do in you. As you deepen your life together through personal sharing, prayer is a response to the burdens you unload or the blessings God gives. Finally, intercede for one another that you can make the changes in thought, word and deed that the Lord has brought to your attention.

¹*The Study of Identification Through Interpersonal Perception*, quoted in Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 83.

²Lawrence O. Richards, *Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), p. 29.

A DISCIPLE'S COVENANT

In order to grow toward maturity in Christ and complete *Discipleship Essentials*, I commit myself to the following standards:

1. Complete all assignments on a weekly basis prior to my discipleship appointment in order to contribute fully (see "Suggested Study Format").
2. Meet weekly with my discipleship partners for approximately one and one-half hours to dialogue over the content of the assignments.
3. Offer myself fully to the Lord with the anticipation that I am entering a time of accelerated transformation during this discipleship period.
4. Contribute to a climate of honesty, trust and personal vulnerability in a spirit of mutual up-building.
5. Give serious consideration to continuing the discipling chain by committing myself to invest in at least two other people for the year following the initial completion of *Discipleship Essentials*.

Signed _____

Dated _____

(The above commitments are the minimum standards of accountability, which are reviewed and renewed after lessons eight and sixteen. Feel free to add any other elements to your covenant.)