

# Five Core Essentials for Discipleship in the Church

*“For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me. For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.” 1 Corinthians 4: 15-17*

In the Greek and Roman world, it was customary for young boys to be placed under the supervision of trusted slaves. These slaves were understood to be “teachers, guides or tutors”. They were entrusted with the responsibility to be with the young boy whenever he was out and about, ensuring he was not up to mischief and maintained good morals. In *1 Corinthians 4:15*, Paul uses this cultural practice to draw a comparison and make a point. “Guides” for maturing boys in the Greek and Roman world were outsourced to these “outside of the family” teachers. How much better, then, is the care which new believers will get as Paul provides maturing guidance “within” the household of faith. Paul demonstrates this responsibility for discipleship by sending Timothy, a son and brother to disciple the believers.

This brief passage gives us some insights into Paul’s intentions for maturing believers. Instructors and guides need not be outsourced. Rather, believers can mature within the local church family. Spiritual fathers should understand their responsibilities for the spiritual maturation of their children. Spiritual growth should be an objective of the family of God. Furthermore, training and teaching will be necessary for youth to be brought into maturity. What follows are five core essentials for a local church that discipled its members.

## **PRESENCE**

In our world today location is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Teachers can teach from home. Meetings can be done virtually. Doctors can practice on patients from a distance. Yet presence with people in physical location is ground-zero for discipleship. We are finite people with locale. Discipleship acts on the spiritual man who inhabits a physical body which is always present in some location. Discipleship happens in space and time with people. It can happen when we say to each other, “Here I am.”

## **COMMITMENT**

We live in a transient world. Long gone are the days when people lived their entire lives within 30 miles of their birthplace. Today many are uprooted by jobs, interests, pursuits and heartaches. To be clear, living as such is not saintly, nor is travel wrong. Abraham, Moses, and Paul did it as did countless others. In fact, believers are often called pilgrims. Yet, in our transitoriness, we run the risk of not lingering with people long enough to shape them and be shaped by them. When people are stable in a location, we find that community plays an important role in their spiritual growth. Have you found that you can’t choose your family, neighbors or your fellow church members? This is unlike the manufactured communities in our social media feeds where we can toggle people in and out of our lives.

Commitment can be scary, whether it is committing to a job, a spouse, or a church. Yet, with commitment comes a surprising freedom. The freedom that trades options, distractions and paralysis for focus, investment, and purpose. Commitment to people is required for discipleship in the church to happen. It happens when we say to each other “I am here.”

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## VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability is a necessary element in the discipling community. Vulnerability, transparency, and authenticity are popular buzz words today. Both abuses and benefits are unlocked by these terms. In short, we should not understand vulnerability to be the highest aim of human behavior. Rather it is a means to an end and not the end itself. Transparency, vulnerability, and authenticity should not be the celebration of our human condition, however disordered it may be. Rather, transparency, vulnerability, and authenticity is the honesty required to allow both my ordered and disordered life to be exposed for what it is. It is in this openness that proper care can be brought to bear and growth can result.

Vulnerability, by definition, takes on risk. We risk rejection. We risk scorn. We risk embarrassment. For this reason, vulnerability must be met with reception. Reception of others in their vulnerability happens when we say to each other, “I take you to be on my team.”

## INTENTIONALITY

Discipleship is the process of growing into Christ’s likeness. We become participants in the long legacy of discipleship that began with Christ and has reformed lives throughout the generations. Every believer has a direct line, linking themselves to Christ through the names and faces of people who have gone before. People who were intentional and active about growing us. The exercises that give rise to Christ likeness are modeled for us in this way. To be clear, Paul did not see himself as neither the end nor the standard. Rather, Christ was who He followed. Christ was the end. Christ was the standard. Discipleship happens when we say to each other, “Follow me...for I follow Christ.”

## PATIENTLY

Discipleship happens over time. Jesus disciplined his friends along the road at 3 mph. In our fast-paced world, the community that disciples must walk at a pace that allows people to catch up. Disciples are made over years, not in days. Lingering with people will be required. Discipleship burns the fuel of patience. The willingness to walk with people and endure the unpleasantness that will undoubtedly be a part of the process of spiritual growth. While discipleship burns the fuel of patience, patience burns the fuel of hope. The community that disciples will live in the past, present and future hope of Christ. They will understand that His grace is required and His Holy Spirit is central to the effort of growing disciples after Jesus. Discipleship of this kind can happen when we say to each other, “let’s walk together as long as it takes.”

I imagine Paul’s illustration of Greek and Roman teachers being replaced by fathers was very vivid in the minds of his audience. It was probably hard to imagine a Greek or Roman father so vested in his sons. Such a vision would challenge the cultural mores of family life and family goals. Paul, with this scriptural example, is casting a vision for the believing family. A vision that the church today should share. Paul’s illustration also rings true in our societal context as well. We live in a world with endless instruction, information, sound bites, videos, podcasts etc. and many Christians seek guidance and discipleship outside their local context. Suppose the local church reclaims this charge of maturing their own? Suppose it captures this vision – a local church community that disciples its members.