

# **MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH**

## **DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING**

### **7**

#### **How Would We Know a Mature Disciple If We Saw One?**

##### *The Characteristics of a Mature Disciple*

I have written the first six chapters to help prepare churches for developing a clear, biblical strategy for making disciples. To accomplish a biblical strategy, it is imperative that a church and its leaders understand both Jesus's and the church's message and methodology of discipleship. I have also answered the question, What is a disciple and how does a church make one? All this is critical to a disciple-making ministry in today's church. Now we are actually ready to construct a clear process or pathway for making mature disciples that is tailor-made for your church.

To understand fully our goal—to produce a clear process for making mature believers in the church—we must clearly understand two key terms: *process* and *mature*. The first is *process* (and any of its synonyms—*strategy*, *pathway*, *path*, and others). The goal is to design a *process* to move people from where they are spiritually (a nonbeliever or immature believer) to maturity. Process consists of your primary ministries, those that you believe are essential to bring people to maturity in Christ. Determining what these should be is the goal of the next chapter.

Our ultimate goal is to develop not just disciples (believers) but *mature* disciples. To accomplish this, we must determine the characteristics or marks of a mature disciple, which is the goal of this chapter. First, we will examine a tool entitled the Spiritual Journey Evaluation and then address the characteristics of a mature disciple.

##### **The Spiritual Journey Evaluation**

Several years ago, Bob Gilliam developed an evaluation that provides us with a necessary introduction to this chapter and those that follow, along with several important benchmarks.

We discovered in chapter 4 that the church is responsible to assist its people in becoming and then growing as Jesus's disciples. We also found out in chapter 2 that currently in Europe and North America the church is not doing very well at this. So we must pause and ask why. Why are most churches not making disciples?

Bob Gilliam affirms the failure of the church to make disciples and then gets at some of the key elements that explain why this is the case. In 1994 Gilliam developed the Spiritual Journey Evaluation as an attempt to determine if today's church is making disciples. The evaluation consisted of a survey given to nearly four thousand attenders in thirty-five churches in several denominations scattered from Florida to Washington. After analyzing the results, Gilliam observed, "Most people in these churches are not growing spiritually. Of those taking this survey, 24 percent indicated that their behavior was sliding backward and 41 percent said they were 'static' in their spiritual growth." Therefore, 65 percent of those responding indicated that they were either plateaued or declining in their spiritual growth. If you recall, I presented this information in chapter 2 on how the church is doing, but I did not present the following.

What does all this mean? The answer forms the basis for this chapter and the next and provides you with some disciple-making benchmarks. Gilliam continues:

It seems clear from all this data that for some reason churches aren't effectively being intentional about making disciples. The churches provided as examples aren't exceptions but are normative compared to the experience of most. There is very little reason to believe that your church is any different. Why? Their leaders don't know what a disciple looks like. They don't know how to make a disciple even if they can define one. They don't know how church programs work together to make disciples. They have no way to measure progress. Their leaders aren't model disciples but they do reproduce after their kind. They don't know how to become intentional without splitting the church.

Not much has changed for the church since Gilliam conducted his survey. Perhaps things have gotten worse. Gilliam focused our attention on six reasons for this failure.

1. "Their leaders don't know what a disciple looks like." To develop a clear strategy, your congregation must know what a disciple looks like. You must answer

the question, What are the marks of an authentic Christian? I will address this in the rest of this chapter.

2. “They don’t know how to make a disciple even if they can define one.” As mentioned earlier in this book, my experience as a seminary professor and church consultant is that most people cannot define a disciple. Gilliam is correct when he states that most churches do not know how to make disciples. The provocative question is, Where would a church or its pastors learn how to make disciples? I will address this issue in the next chapter.

3. “They don’t know how church programs work together to make disciples.” All churches have programs. My experience is that few churches have thought through what these programs should be and how they should work together to make disciples. This will also be a goal of the next chapter.

4. “They have no way to measure progress.” The way to measure progress is to have in place a formal system of evaluation. Since people evaluate all churches informally, I would argue that the church should design a formal evaluation process and thus benefit from it. But how might a church develop such a system? I will address this in chapter 9.

5. “Their leaders aren’t model disciples but they do reproduce after their kind.” Fortunately this is not true of many leaders in our churches. Still, most of us have recognized a moral decline of church leadership in general and staff in particular in the latter half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. I will address this moral decline in chapter 10.

6. “They don’t know how to become intentional without splitting the church.” While this section of the book addresses this topic indirectly, it is the goal of this book to help you implement an intentional pathway for making mature disciples that unites rather than splits a church.

### **The Characteristics of a Mature Disciple**

The goal of a church’s ministry is to bring its people to spiritual maturity, which, theologically, is the ultimate goal of the Great Commission. Therefore an important question that a church must answer is, What does spiritual maturity look like? Gilliam notes above that a major part of the problem is that churches do not know

what a disciple looks like. How would we know a mature disciple if he or she were to walk through the door? We must discover the marks of a mature believer, and that can be done with the following three-step process.

### ***Step 1: Determine the Church's Mission***

To discover the marks of a mature believer, we must return to the church's mission. The church's disciple-making process is inextricably tied to its mission. ultimately accomplishes the mission in the life of the church. To jump into the disciple-making process without determining the church's mission is to get the proverbial cart in front of the horse. As we discovered earlier, the church's mission has always been and will continue to be the Great Commission. I advise all churches to develop a mission statement for their church. It is to be short and memorable so that everyone in the church will know what it is and be able to articulate it when asked to identify it. Some examples are "To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ"; "To present Christ as Savior and pursue Christ as Lord"; "To know Christ and make him known." At the heart of each of these mission statements is the Great Commission.

From a discipleship perspective, the church's mission involves both making disciples (evangelism) and maturing them (edification). To picture this, we need to return to and review the Disciple-Making Continuum that I introduced in chapter 1. Before a person comes to faith, he or she is in what I refer to optimistically as the prebirth stage. Prebirth is the time one is an unbeliever. At a point in time a person hears the gospel and accepts Christ as Savior and experiences a new birth (John 3:1–8). Thus this new believer has passed from prebirth to new birth. However, the new believer is not to stop at that point. There is more to Christianity than excellent fire insurance. From this point on, the converted believer is to begin the process of spiritual growth toward maturity (see Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28–29; Heb. 5:11–6:3). I believe that there are degrees of maturity and at some point a believer crosses a point where he or she enters the early stages of maturity and hopefully continues to grow and mature as a disciple.

### **Disciple-Making Continuum**

## **Nondisciple**

## **New Disciple**

## **Growing Disciple**

Prebirth

New birth

Maturity

(unbelief)

(belief)

(growth)

## **The Marks of a Mature Disciple**

### **Step 1: Determine the church's mission.**

### ***Step 2: Ask the Sanctification Question***

After the church has articulated the Great Commission in a short, memorable statement, determining that its mission is to win people to Christ and help them mature as believers, we must decide what characteristics a maturing believer would exhibit. To do this we must ask the sanctification question. I suggest that a group of leaders brainstorm, based on your knowledge of the New Testament, to come up with a list of characteristics. You need to begin with a descriptive list, such as the following: baptism, worship, prayer, evangelism, a knowledge and application of Scripture, service, communion (the Lord's Supper), fellowship, the fruit of the Spirit, financial giving, fruit bearing (general good works), love, fear of God, and so on. And some would include various spiritual disciplines, some of which are included in this list.

Next, synthesize all the biblical characteristics under at least two but not more than five headings. This is a theological exercise. Some specific characteristics can be combined under other broader ones. For example, from a theological perspective, you could put prayer, the Lord's Supper, financial giving, and other components of worship under worship. (Scott Horrell, a friend and colleague at Dallas Seminary, has written on this topic and in a private conversation told me that he places

service under worship as well.) One church that I worked with, Fellowship Bible Church in Dallas, Texas, puts all the characteristics under three Cs:

1. Celebrate (worship)
2. Connect (biblical instruction and fellowship)
3. Contribute (evangelism and service)

While I really like the three Cs, I prefer to place the characteristics under the five functions of the church. (Note that these five are similar to but not quite the same as Rick Warren's five purposes for the church.) The five functions are the following:

1. Worship (Acts 2:42–43, 46–47)
2. Fellowship or community (Acts 2:42, 44–46)
3. Biblical instruction (Acts 2:42)
4. Evangelism (Acts 2:41, 47)
5. Service (Acts 2:44–45)

*Worship* of God is the first characteristic of a maturing believer and involves up-reach. When we worship God, we are attributing supreme worth to him. And Jesus tells us that God seeks our worship, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

*Fellowship* involves in-reach. We need to be involved with other believers as they are part of the church, and we desperately need one another, as we discovered through the one-another passages in chapter 4. I have found that I experience the greatest doubts about my faith when I do not find time in my busy schedule to be with other believers. So a maturing disciple will spend time in fellowship with other believers.

*Biblical instruction* involves in-reach. We believers need to know and apply God's Word to our lives. The writer of Hebrews warns that one reason some believers remain immature in their faith is a lack of knowledge and application of Scripture in their lives (Heb. 5:11–6:3). According to Willow Creek Community Church's

congregational survey, 60 percent of their most mature people in the church want “more in-depth Bible teaching.” A maturing disciple studies God’s Word and follows its teachings.

*Evangelism* involves outreach. God wants us to share our faith with those who do not know Christ as Savior (Col. 4:3–6). My consulting ministry has shown me that few churches from coast-to-coast and border-to-border in America value evangelism. Consequently it is not being done. This is an area where the church really needs to turn up the heat. A maturing disciple will find opportunities to share his or her faith with unbelievers.

*Service* is in-reach. God has given every believer a spiritual gift to use in ministry (1 Peter 4:10–11). This is critical in the life of the church. Paul teaches in Ephesians 4:12–13 that service is necessary if a church is to mature in Christ. In the Willow Creek Community Church congregational survey, they discovered that their more mature believers were strongest on service as an expression of their faith. Thus they believe that the church’s primary role in the lives of their most mature believers is to provide them with serving opportunities.

Another way to group the characteristics would be to use the three marks of a disciple, given in John’s Gospel. They are the following:

1. Abiding in God’s Word (John 8:31–32)
2. Loving one another (John 13:34–35)
3. Bearing fruit (John 15:8)

While I covered these briefly in chapter 5, I want to revisit them with a little more detail. In both John’s Gospel and especially his letters, he wrestles with how one can know that he or she is a believer. In 1 John, for example, he provides a number of tests for a person to take that are designed to answer this question. So we should not be surprised to see him doing much the same in his Gospel in chapters 8, 13, and 15.

In John 8:31–32 Jesus speaks to believing Jews, and he tells them that they are really his disciples (believers) if they hold to his teaching. I believe that he is saying they are believers if they agree with his teaching and do not abandon or fall away from it in the future. Disagreement and abandonment are signs of unbelief.

The result of holding to his teaching is knowing truth and freedom. When I read this passage, I am reminded of Matthew 28:20, where Jesus tells the Eleven that they are to teach their disciples to obey everything he has commanded of them.

Jesus's teaching in John 13:34–35 is fairly straightforward. He tells the disciples that the mark of a disciple (believer) is love for one another, and he uses his love for them as an example of what that love looks like. Jesus repeats this later in the form of a command in John 15:17. This love for one another is also one of the tests of faith in 1 John 3:14–15.

Finally, Jesus's teaching on fruit bearing in John 15:1–17 is not as explicit. In verse 8 he teaches his disciples: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." The problem is pinning down what he meant by bearing fruit. The term *fruit* is mentioned eight times in this chapter in a progression from "fruit" (v. 2) to "more fruitful" (v. 2) to "much fruit" (vv. 5, 8). The question is, what is the fruit that he is talking about? The context does not answer the question. Likely it is general fruit bearing that involves a lifestyle characterized by good works befitting a true disciple. This is borne out by the fire figure in verse 6 and the broader context of the Gospels, as in Matthew 7:15–20, where the Savior teaches:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

One function that some might argue is missing from these three marks of a disciple is worship. While John does not state that worship is a mark of a true disciple—at least not in the same way as he emphasizes abiding in God's Word, loving each other, and bearing fruit—he does say in John 4:24 to a Samaritan woman: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

In *Following the Master* Michael Wilkins notes the early practices of the church in Acts 2:42: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. He explains, "We find in these practices of the early church—devoted to the apostles'



teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer—the four essential elements in the religious practice of the Christian church.... We see here the essential ingredients of the way in which the new community sustained their life of fellowship.” Thus you might want to use these four practices as your marks for a maturing disciple. However, later Wilkins seems to expand this list when he says, “We may go so far as to say that in many ways discipleship is the overall goal of the church, including evangelism, nurturing, fellowship, leadership, worship, etc.”<sup>6</sup>

So give some thought to the characteristics you believe are part of a mature disciple.

### **The Marks of a Mature Disciple**

Step 1: Determine the church’s mission.

**Step 2: Ask the sanctification question.**

#### ***Step 3: Ask the Communication Question***

The communication question asks, How will you communicate these characteristics or marks so that the congregation knows them and, most important, remembers them? First, when you synthesize all the biblical characteristics under not more than five categories, you aid the communication process. People tend not to remember more than five points and may even struggle with that many. So developing the characteristics is not only a theological exercise but a communication one as well.

Second, determine which of the following will best communicate your characteristics to your people: alliteration, an acrostic, a person, an object, pictures, symbols, or some other form. The only limit to the form is your creativity and imagination.

See if any of the following examples would work for your church.

#### **Alliteration**

Alliteration involves choosing terms that all begin with the same letter. For example, at the last church I pastored, we came up with the four Cs. Here is how we communicated them. We placed our mission statement that identified a mature believer as a fully functioning follower of Christ at the top and followed it with the four Cs:

Our mission is to help our people become fully functioning followers of Christ. Fully functioning followers have four characteristics:

1. Conversion—they are converted and know Christ as Savior.
2. Community—they value and are part of a biblically functioning community (small group).
3. Commitment—they have made the deepest of commitments of their lives to Christ.
4. Contribution—they are contributing to Christ's kingdom and the church by serving people, supporting the church financially, and sharing their faith (the three Ss).

If I were to produce this again, I would add a fifth C—celebration. Somehow we left out celebration or worship.

The church I attend (Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas) has developed the following mission and characteristics using four Ws:

Our mission is to share Christ and build believers. Believers display four marks:

1. Worship—they worship God both corporately and privately.
2. Word—they live by God's Word, understanding that it is the authority for all of life.
3. Work—they contribute to God's work by using their gifts to serve the body, to give financially, and to relate experientially.
4. World—they impact the world by reaching out to their unchurched, lost friends and becoming personally involved in world missions.

Willow Creek Community Church has the following mission and characteristics:

Our mission is to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. Fully devoted followers of Christ have five characteristics: grace, growth, gifts, groups, and good stewardship.

If someone were to plant a church, an option would be to use terms beginning with E: evangelism, encouragement (fellowship), exaltation (worship), equipping (biblical instruction), and enlisting (service).

### **An Acrostic**

Some churches use an acrostic to communicate the characteristics of a mature disciple. The first letters of the characteristics when combined spell out a memorable word that could tie back into the mission statement. For example, below is the mission statement and characteristics of Valleydale Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Their acrostic forms the word *grace*, which is memorable for their congregation. Note also that Valleydale uses strong action verbs rather than nouns.

Our mission is to provide the best opportunity for people to become fully devoted Christ followers. Fully devoted Christ followers have five characteristics:

Glorify God through meaningful worship.

Relate together in biblical community.

Apply God's truth through discipleship.

Cultivate a lifestyle of service.

Expand God's kingdom through evangelism.

Grace Brethren Church of Wooster, Ohio, uses the same acrostic because it matches their name and each characteristic also represents its core values.

Our mission is to develop all people into fully devoted Christ followers. Fully devoted Christ followers have five characteristics. They desire to:

Grow

Reach out

Act

Connect

Exalt

The advantage for this church is that if its members can remember the name of their church, they can remember the characteristics of a mature disciple. And the same goes for their core values.

The Bandera Road Community Church in San Antonio, Texas, has developed as their acrostic the word *fitness*, tying it back into their mission statement.

Our mission is to lead people that are far from God to be spiritually fit followers of Christ. Spiritually fit followers of Christ have seven characteristics:

Family ties (community)

Intimacy with God

Treasure (stewardship)

Networked (mobilized)

Engaging the lost

Spiritual practices

Social action

As you develop an acrostic, it is important to make it truly memorable. Again, when you have more than six characteristics, people may remember the first letters but not the words or what they represent. The way to know is ask people. Quiz them and see if they remember the characteristics.

## **A Diagram**

Create a diagram to illustrate the characteristics of a mature disciple. You could use the heart, head, hands, and feet of the human body to communicate your characteristics. You could also combine this with alliteration. For example, *word* (2 Tim. 3:15) goes with the head (Matt. 22:37); *worship* (Rom. 12:1; John 4:24) with the heart (Ps. 24:4; Matt. 22:37); *work* (Eph. 2:10) with the hands (Ps. 24:4); and *witness* with the feet (Rom. 10:15). I developed this in consultation with Neptune Baptist Church, located near Jacksonville, Florida.

These are just a few ways to communicate your characteristics of maturity to your people. Be creative and come up with your own. To some people, using one of these methods may seem gimmicky. If this is a problem, you may want to consider another approach. However, the advantages of these communication tools clearly outweigh any disadvantages.

### **The Marks of a Mature Disciple**

Step 1: Determine the church's mission—the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20).

Step 2: Ask the sanctification question—What are the marks or characteristics of a mature disciple?

**Step 3: Ask the communication question—**How will we communicate the marks to the congregation?

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you believe that the ultimate goal of the local church is spiritual maturity? Why or why not? What Scripture would support this position?
2. Do you agree that the mission of every church is the Great Commission? Why or why not? What is the mission of your church? If it is not the Great Commission, then what is it (do not fudge on this one)?
3. Does your church have a mission statement? If not, why not? If so, what is it? Is it short and memorable? Does it have the Great Commission at its core?

4. What are some biblical characteristics of a mature disciple? Did you come up with some that the author did not? If so, what are they?
5. In communicating your characteristics, do you prefer alliteration, an acrostic, a diagram, or some other approach? What method would you use?
6. This chapter provides you with several churches' characteristics. Which do you like best? Would the way the church communicates them work for your church? Why or why not? If not, you will need to design a vehicle of your own. What might that be?
7. Is the name of your church short enough that you could use it as an acrostic for your characteristics? Would this work as well for your core values?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, [\*Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 75–85.