

The Discipleship Cycle

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Abstract: This article guides readers through the three areas of the Discipleship Cycle and provides exercises along the way for practical use and experience.

How to Develop World-Changers by Making Disciples of Jesus

Do you long to be transformed? Jesus' goal for you is that you will become a wonderful version of yourself, like a butterfly that once was a caterpillar.

I have met people like that. They are marvelous to be around. If you want to become a world-changer, and if you want to help others become world-changers, then you will want to learn as much as you can about how to cooperate with God in this process of transformation by grace.

God used Jon and Alex to transform my life. My senior year of high school, I had prayed with all my soul, "God, change my life. Do whatever you want with me. Make a difference in the world through me."

Six months later, in my first week at college, I met Jon, a sophomore Bible Study leader. Alex, the InterVarsity staff was co-leading the small group and training Jon. I liked them, but had no idea they were the answer to my prayer.

The Bible study was good, but my life trajectory was changed when Jon began to disciple me, with help from Alex. My spiritual growth took off, new worlds were opened to me in the areas of intimacy with Jesus, my character, my community relationships, and my participation in God's kingdom mission on campus.

They taught me how to reach out to other students. I was debating with atheists about absolute truth, but Jon and Alex became friends with Michelle and Daren, two skeptics in my class. When they became followers of Jesus, I was overjoyed. I began following this new model because I saw that it worked.

And their influence didn't stop with me. With help from Jon, I began to disciple other students: Tom, John, and Sung. Our group was to help people become maturing, fruitful disciples of Jesus who in turn led others to Jesus as well. In the process, I also continued to be transformed.

Jesus' Method

This is how Jesus changed the world: he entrusted the gospel to faithful people who would be able to pass it on to others.¹ His original twelve disciples passed it on to people like Barnabas, who passed it on to people like Paul, who passed it on to people like Timothy.²

Today he continues to call people from being skeptics to seekers to world-changers, through us, as we make disciples of Jesus.³ This article will equip you with tools to help others grow as disciples of Jesus, and to help you grow as a disciple, too.

Out of the Coffee Shop, Into the World

A growing student fellowship in Virginia had been using a popular book on discipleship as a curriculum for discipling first-year students. But while it provided great discussion topics and helped students develop a good basic theology, it didn't press them out to do mission.

What produces robust, missional discipleship? InterVarsity staff David de Leon has been paying attention to discipleship on campus. "Off-campus mission trips have been kind of steroidal for us," he said. "I saw students who went on the Global Urban Trek really bloom as a result." Would it be great to harness some of the power of urban or global mission projects, to strengthen discipleship in your ministry?

The Discipleship Cycle is based on the dynamics we've seen in powerful mission experiences. Disciples of Jesus often grow most when we go through a simple three-part cycle: hearing the word, responding actively, and then debriefing.

Disciples Make Disciples of Jesus

Growing as disciples is mysterious. Like so many parts of the gospel, our growth incorporates a paradox. Jesus captures this in his parable, "The kingdom of God is like someone scattering seeds on the growth, who sleeps every night and gets up every day, and the seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how. The earth produces first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, the farmer goes in with a sickle, because it's harvest time."⁴

Here's the paradox: we can't control the growth. We can't force it. We don't even know how it happens! Yet we play a crucial role in it. If the farmer doesn't plow, plant, water, and fertilize the crops—all back-breaking labor—there will be little or no harvest. Wise farmers keep learning about these processes and working hard.

So how do disciples grow?

Life on Life

Jon and Alex were like farmers. They couldn't make me or other students grow, but they did many things to foster our growth as disciples. The main thing they did was to share life with us.

They were the first leaders who ever spent time with me outside of meetings. We played flag football on the quad, we ate at the dining hall, and went to campus concerts together. They gave me books like *Out of the Saltshaker*, which we discussed and applied together. We watched movies and analyzed their messages in light of the kingdom of God. We heard Keith Phillips from World Impact talk about serving inner city kids, then we cooked meals and served the homeless ten minutes from campus.

The most effective discipling takes place life-on-life. To disciple someone at a distance is extremely difficult, if it is possible. I personally have not been able to figure out how to do it.

Through being around Jon and Alex, I found there was so much more to following Jesus than I'd ever imagined. They taught me to keep a journal, share with my friends what I learn about Jesus, reconcile across cultural barriers, take a Sabbath, serve others, love the least on our campus. They modeled those for me, challenged me into them, and then equipped me with the practical skills I needed. They shared life with me, and to this day I am a changed man because of them.

Who are you sharing your life with? Are there a few people who can see how you live a day in and day out, and follow your model?

When Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, they must have thought immediately of what they experienced when Jesus had made disciples of them. He had called them to come follow him, be with him, and do what he did.⁵

Jesus did not hold classes, create a curriculum, or start a program. He taught and served the masses, but from the beginning of his ministry until he ascended into heaven, he intentionally lived his life out with a focused group of men and women who learned about God and his kingdom through personal experiences.

Dying to Self

Life-on-life discipling is costly. It means that Jesus is inviting you to suffer with those you disciple, like he did. This came in various forms for him, and it will for us, too: being misunderstood, having the disciples be slow to believe and hard of heart, even being betrayed or denied by friends. Often, in my experience, it has been the pain of sticking close to someone I'm discipling as they go through a painful relationship or a crisis of identity. Jon and Alex suffered with me, and I'm sure in many more ways than I even know.

But the only way to experience the power and joy of the resurrection is to die first. When I have seen people grow amazingly into fruitful and mature disciples of Jesus, it has been because someone was Jesus to them; someone paid the price and suffered with them, like Jon and Alex did with me. And the joy of watching a person grow and blossom as you invest in them is an experience I have no words to describe. My friend, I pray that you, too, will experience that joy!

Hear the Word

Learning to Hear God

Dallas Willard wrote a number of profound books on discipleship. A fellow staff once got to meet Dallas, and asked, "What is the most important thing for student discipleship?" Dallas thought for a moment, then responded, "Learning how to hear God."⁶

I was taken aback when I heard that; it sounded too simplistic, and I wasn't sure what it had to do with discipleship. But as I lived with that answer, I began to realize it was profound. I noticed students could take huge risks for the kingdom, but if they did not have conviction from the Lord, it did not help their faith grow, it was just a risk.

I noticed that sometimes students I disciple felt they heard God challenging them to do things I never would have thought of; I realized how true it is that the Lord sees the heard, and that the Spirit of the Lord can discern deep within us things we don't even know ourselves.

York Moore, a gifted evangelist who lives in Detroit, once told me that he had been disciple by the leader of InterVarsity's Black Campus Ministries, Alex Anderson. "I remember asking Alex for help with a ministry problem," York said. "He said, 'Let's pray about that.' We prayed, then he asked me if the Lord had given me an answer. I said no, and was expecting Alex to give me some wisdom. But he said, 'Then let's pray again.'" I still didn't hear anything, and I really wanted Alex to tell me what to do. But he had us keep praying until I heard from the Lord.

"He was as wise man, and taught me so many things," York said, "but those times left an indelible impression on my life. What Alex did was equip me to go to the Lord on my own and get the wisdom I needed, even when he wasn't around." That's one of the best gifts a disciple can give.

What's your goal, to make disciples of yourself? Or of Jesus? Whether through Bible Study, sermons, private devotions, listening prayer, a personal exhortation, or the challenge of a leader, are you helping people hear Jesus and obey him? Or are you merely trying to get them to believe what you believe and do what you think they should do? There's a vast difference.

As disciplers, we would be wise to check regularly to make sure we are encouraging those we influence to gain a sense of inner conviction from God.

Ways God Speaks

The Bible records stories of God speaking to his people from beginning to end, and it seems that God's creativity is infinity.

He spoke to Abraham in visions, to Joseph in dreams, to Moses out of a burning bush, to Samuel as a voice in the night, to David through his friend Nathan, to Daniel as he prayed through Scripture, to Mary by sending an angel, to Paul by an inner prompting, and to John by his Spirit of revelation. One theologian has been counting the different ways God speaks to people. She has compiled a list that has now reached 40 ways.

Whenever we think we may have heard something from God, we need to take it seriously and handle it with care and wisdom. The third commandment says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." You could also translate "in vain" as "misuse," "thoughtlessly," and "for evil purposes."

If someone tells you, "God told me to date so-and-so," they have played a trump card that's hard to respond to. I have heard students say, "I'm not going to the Bible study because I don't feel called by God," or "I feel like God wants me to date so-and-so, even though she isn't a Christian." We have to be careful not to take our feelings as God's leading.

Rather, we need to learn how to discern what is truly the Spirit of God. Fortunately, God has given us two gifts to help us: the Bible and community.

Because the Bible reveals such a clear picture of God's character and ways, particularly in the person of Jesus, it is crucial to measure anything we think God may be saying against the teachings of the Scripture.

Community is an important chunk, too: Asking other people who are mature followers of Jesus for help in discerning has often saved me from making mistakes. We should develop the habit of checking with Scripture and with community.

Keep Your Heart Soft

However the Lord chooses to speak to us, we must respond. One of the most valuable teachings I have ever heard was this: if we hear God, and do not obey, we are hardening our hearts. As a result it will be more difficult to hear the Lord in the future. On the other hand, the more we respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the softer our hearts grow and the better we will become at hearing God.

Ways God Speaks

- How do you hear God? List different ways you hear Jesus speak into your life.
- Take some time to reflect on how open and teachable you are. Do you place limits on how God's Spirit can speak to you? What God can say to you? What God can speak through?
- Think about a conversation you need to have with someone you're influencing, whether inviting them to an event, challenging them out of an area of sin, or encouraging them to take a new risk of faith. How can you use the Bible in that conversation?

Respond Actively

When you respond to God's leading, you never know what God might do. Amy and Autumn, at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, found this out in a dramatic way.⁷

Amy felt God inviting her to lead the students into a bigger vision for the ministry at Drake. They got excited about their new vision, "Build at Drake, increase to other campuses, and prosper the city." But over the next semester, their numbers declined. Frustrated and confused Amy asked God what was going on. In prayer she saw a picture of herself shooting an arrow and hitting the bull's eye; but then God pulled the arrow out and struck it in the target's outermost ring.

Autumn, a student that had converted at Drake, spent a summer in Ethiopia working with former prostitutes. God broke her heart for sex workers, and in response she asked Amy how the student fellowship could seek the prosperity of the city by working against sex trafficking in Des Moines. They had seen news coverage of forced prostitution rings being uncovered, but they were stymied in their attempts to get any more information. So they started a Thursday night prayer meeting, where they asked God to show them how to pray, where to go, and what to do. At the first meeting, several students had a street name come to mind; another received the name of a stadium, another heard "Relax" and saw a motel. They began to freak out when they realized that both the stadium and Motel Relax were located on that particular street.

In response, they drove to the motel and prayed that God would bring justice, and that women would be set free. A few weeks later, 53 pimps and johns were arrested at Motel Relax and four other locations in Des Moines.

God continued to lead the students, through prayer. For example, they began to serve and minister to dancers at five strip clubs where they felt God lead them. As they responded in faith to Jesus, the students at Drake grew in their faith in God's power and goodness, and learned that following Jesus can lead to real change.

Learning by Doing

If you ever took physics, you probably already know from experience what three physicists recently concluded in a scientific study: lectures are one of the least effective methods for teaching physics. Adult learning expert David Kolb says some of students learn better through concrete experience, others through active experimentation, and still others through reflective observation or abstract conceptualization.⁹ Two thousand years ago, Jesus used all these methods in his discipling.

Clearly, Jesus wanted people to gain more than just information from him—more than theological positions or the ability to articulate a set of values. He trained them to do the work of the kingdom: proclaiming the gospel, serving the needy, helping the sick, crossing ethnic barriers, advocating for the oppressed to be set free, teaching people to worship in spirit and in truth.

By far the best way to learn something is by seeing it in action—seeing it modeled—and then doing it for yourself. Dave and Jon Ferguson summarize it in these 5 steps.¹⁰

I do. You watch. We talk.

I do. You help. We talk.

You do. I help. We talk.

You do. I watch. We talk.

You do. Someone else watches.

In discipling, there is no substitute for actually *doing* the commands of Jesus together.

Active Response

- Has God been convicting you of something that you haven't acted on yet? If you can't remember anything, ask Jesus. If you can, ask the Spirit to help you commit to a particular act in response.
- When was the last time you asked those you are discipling what God is convicting them of or saying to them?
- Reflect on those you are discipling. What do they need to grow in, and how can you help them learn experientially by doing an activity together?

Debrief & Interpret

Jesus did more than train the disciples. His goal was nothing less than *transformation*.

For decades, InterVarsity students have spent their summers serving in Global Projects and Urban Projects. Project leaders and campus staff have observed an interesting phenomenon: without time to debrief, reflect, and interpret these experiences, they don't bear much fruit in the lives of those who serve on them. Scott Bessenecker, who has worked with thousands of students on these projects, said, "Significant experiences without debrief are like undigested food. The untapped nutrition passes through us and gets flushed away."

Project leaders have learned to budget time and money for team debriefing, in order to maximize the transformation power of these projects. Without debriefing, the money, time, and energy may have little impact. This part of the Discipleship Cycle is the most underutilized of the three, to our great detriment. Disciples who give themselves to learning the skills of good debriefing and interpretation will see their discipling jump to a new level.

Spiritual Fertilizer

Ignatius of Loyola used an equally colorful image. He said our pain and suffering stink up our lives like a huge pile of excrement, until we process our experiences with God and community through reflection and prayer: they then become fertilizer. If you want vigorous personal growth, it's worth the effort this process takes.

Healing prayer can be a powerful tool in this process. The wisdom of another disciple of Jesus who can reframe our experience can also serve us profoundly.

Allison had been on InterVarsity staff in North Carolina for a number of years. As she transitioned off one campus, some alumni questioned her accomplishments there. She felt deeply hurt by them, partly because she had poured out her life for them in so many ways.

Her supervisor, Terri, asked her, "Don't you think it's merciful of the Lord to give you a way to share in the rejection Jesus experienced?"

That perspective moved Allison from the experience of hurt and gave her a new framework to interpret it as being about Jesus. She said, "That was a powerful moment of healing and encouragement for me, and help me move towards the Lord rather than feeling stuck and staying hurt."

This truth applies to all our experiences, not just painful ones. Pausing to reflect and interpret what we have experienced allows us to draw out the lessons, to learn, and then to grow. People who rush from one experience to the next without taking the time to process—to learn about God, themselves, others, and the world—are doomed to gaining little or nothing of much value from the experience.

Iconic Moments

Dave is a chemistry professor who sees his mission as bringing the gospel to students and faculty. His colleague next door had been a churchgoer for many years. Dave engaged him in spiritual conversations, but his connection with God remained fairly abstract.

One day this professor did a zip-line course, which required him to jump off a platform a hundred feet in the air—a huge risk, which required faith in the harness and the trainer belaying his rope.

This experience became an iconic moment for him. For months after this experience, he reflected on the nature of faith, trust, risk, and action. And he did, he realized that for his faith in Jesus to be real, he needed to be willing to take risks and trust Jesus in the same way. That semester, he was convicted to do something about the HIV/AIDS crisis after meeting a visiting scholar from Uganda.

So he took the risk of dramatically changing the direction of his research—a scary idea for any faculty member seeking tenure. He also proposed to teach a class on HIV/AIDS and society, which he has taught for several years now, and which has become one of the most popular courses on campus. He talks explicitly about how his faith motivates him in working for solutions, and he requires students to spend several weeks in fieldwork, experiencing the realities themselves, which they then journal about and debrief during class—because he understands the transformative power of reflecting, debriefing, and interpreting our experiences.

A disciple plays a huge role, especially with newer disciples of Jesus. Stopping to reflect doesn't come naturally, and our culture does nothing to encourage it—quite the opposite. Even seasoned disciples often have trouble discerning what the Lord is doing without help from others. Young disciples must be helped and trained to

take the time to debrief,
ask deliberate questions,
reflect deeply,
see God's work, and
learn the lessons.

Keeping a journal can be an invaluable practice along these lines. Cultivating mentors who can help interpret, broaden perspective, and enlarge worldview is an important life-long practice.

Becoming Skilled at Debriefing

Debriefing skills grow with experience. However, you will probably see a dramatic difference right away simply by asking a few good questions and paying attention to what God is doing and saying.

Here are some good debrief questions you can use as a starting point, with an individual or a group.

1. Recount: What happened, both in the event and inside you?
2. Learn: What did you learn about God, yourself, your community, and the world?
3. Apply: What do you sense God inviting you to keep doing and to change?

If you're familiar with inductive Bible study, you'll notice these parallel the three steps of observe, interpret, and apply.

As a disciple, ask yourself:

- What questions will help someone more fully tell their story?
- What perspective can you offer to help them see their story in light of God's character and activity?
- What steps can they take in light of the bigger perspective?

Time to Debrief What You've Just Read

- Are there experiences in your life that you would do well to take time to debrief and interpret? Start by listing powerful, painful, or confusing experiences the Spirit brings to mind.

- Pray about people you are influencing: ask the Spirit to show you an experience they may need to debrief and take time to interpret. How and when can you plan to do that with them?

Implementing the Cycle

Once you know the Discipleship Cycle, you can apply it in life-on-life discipling relationships, whether in planned ways or spontaneously.

For instance, you may be trying to help people grow in the three elements of InterVarsity's Discipleship Vision: growing in Christ with intimacy, growing like Christ in his character, and growing with Christ in his mission. A simple way to do this is to decide on one area and then follow the cycle. For example, if you're discipling two students who want to grow in prayer, you could read a book or study a passage on prayer together, apply what you learn, then reflect on the experience and debrief it.

Another way to strengthen your discipling times—both formal and informal—is to make space and time to debrief key moments in the lives of those you are discipling. Then make sure that before leaving, each person can answer two questions:

1. What is God saying to me?
2. What am I going to do in response?

Turbo-Charged Events

You can also learn to plan ministry events and on-going structures around the cycle to take advantage of its power for discipleship as well. Here are examples of structures planned around the cycle:

Weekend Conferences: Our annual discipleship conference takes a group of staff and students on a two-day road trip to do ministry at a campus about 50 miles away. Before the project, they study Scripture together about witness and God's heart for justice. Then they go on campus and join the fellowship there in a campus outreach raising awareness about sex trafficking. In the evening they debrief and reflect on their experience.

Then they do the cycle again: the second morning, one of the staff gives a talk, exhorting the students to take new risks of faith that day, back on campus, they respond actively, and end with time to debrief and interpret. But they don't stop there! They end the conference with a time to brainstorm and listen to God about how to apply the lessons back on their own campuses.

Going through the cycle essentially turbo-charges the discipleship that happens in those two days. If you are planning an event, think about how you could incorporate all three elements.

Small Group: Once I led an adult Sunday school class where we simply did two things: we debriefed our active response from the last week's sermon, and then came up with an active response to the sermon we had heard in the service immediately prior to our class. Let me tell you, that group was one of the most transformative I've ever experienced.

A potent but simple weekly format for a small group is:

- debrief last week's active response,
- study the Bible, and
- commit to one active response (which can be the same or different for individuals in the group).

Social Justice Outreach Event: In New York City, community college fellowships have held an event called "Feed 500." They would advertise on campus and gather hundreds of students.

Each student would receive two brown bag lunches. The leader would teach for a few minutes, quoting Jesus and Mother Teresa, who said that when you love the poor, you meet God. Then the leader would send them out to find God in the city by giving a lunch to a homeless person, and sitting down to eat the other lunch with them.

After an hour, hundreds of students would come back from looking for God by serving people they would normally pass in the subway station without a glance. The leader would ask them to share in pairs about how they met God. Some of the students would get to share with the large group. Then they would be invited to an InterVarsity meeting where they could meet God on campus every week.

You have no doubt experienced this cycle in many ways. Jesus is at work to disciple us whether we are aware of this cycle or not. You will be able to come up with more creative ways to implement it. Knowing it and using it deliberately will help us be disciples of Jesus who can make disciples who make disciples.

What Are Your Tendencies?

- Take a minute and reflect on your own discipleship and leadership. Which elements of the Discipleship Cycle tend to be strong for you? Which do you tend to miss? Ask the Lord to highlight one for you to work on strengthening.
- Think of an event or structure for which you have some responsibility. How could use the cycle to strengthen the discipleship that happens here?

References

1. 2 Tim. 2:2, Matt. 28:16-20
2. Read interesting parts of this fascinating story in Acts 4:36-37, Acts 11:19-30, Acts 12:25-13:3, Acts 15:35-16:5, 2 Tim. 1:1-6 and 2:1-2
3. For more on the phases of transformation along this spectrum, from skeptics to seekers to followers to leaders to world-changers, see [*Once Was Lost*](#) by Don Everts and Doug Schaupp (IVP, 2008) and [*Real Life: A Christianity Worth Living Out*](#) by James Choung (IVP, 2012).
4. Mark 4:26-29, paraphrased from the NRSV.
5. For example, Mark 3:14 and Luke 9:1-2.
6. His book (aptly titled *Hearing God*, now in expanded version from IVP) is a great resource on this issues.
7. The full story is in this blog post: <http://www.releaseotheape.com/treasure-hunt/>.
8. See this article on the work of U of Arizona prof. David Hestenes, Harvard prof. Joe Redish, and U of Maryland prof. Eric Mazur: <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/01/144550920/physicists-seek-to-lose-the-lecture-as-teaching-tool>.
9. See, for example, websites like http://www.changingminds.org/explanations/learning/kolb_learning.htm or (now out of print) Kolb, D. A. 1981. *Learning Style Inventory: Self-Scoring Inventory and Interpretation Booklet*, Bonton, MA: McBer & Company.
10. [*Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Church Movement*](#) by Dave and Jon Ferguson (Zondervan, 2010), p. 63.