

DISCIPLE BANDS
(Bible Study Groups)

The core of a Disciple Band is Bible Study, prayer, and sharing. But not all Bible Study Groups are the same. So let me tell you a little more about the Disciple Band.

There are lots of superb people around, with skills, knowledge, and experience in many areas of life. As it happens, there are not many people who know more about Bible Study Groups than I do. This is because Dr. Roy Pearson (at Andover Newton Theological School) brought to his class in Practical Theology a few laymen from his former church in Lexington, Massachusetts. Together they talked to us about their experience in Bible Study Groups. It was 1958. I was twenty-three, eager for my first church, and eager to become a true and faithful pastor. And I remember saying to myself after that session: “That is what I want for the people in my churches!” (I wasn’t clear yet about to whom churches actually belong; sometimes I’m still not really sure. Some of them belong to Satan, some to Jesus, and lots of them to little power groups of humans who think they are smarter than Jesus.)

I began forming Bible Study Groups from the very beginning of my ministry, in Paxton, Massachusetts. Before long, the lay leaders of that congregation realized that this was a new threat to their control, and they voted (in the Church Council) that we could not hold Bible Study Groups in that church. So we went underground and held our meetings in each other’s homes. Soon we had three groups and, despite the opposition, they blessed and brought new life into the congregation. Throughout all the years of my entire ministry, I have always been involved in three to five Bible Study Groups at a time, and others were going on beyond my personal participation. This means I have been personally involved as a member participant in at least thirty different Bible Study Groups. (Because Christians so often exaggerate to make a point, I have called this on the low side.) And they have each been very different.

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These groups do not meet for just a season or a stated number of times. The pattern of “meet six times” or “meet for three months” is a pattern that has become a popular concession to our culture: to be active in our faith and growth, but only in brief spurts. Our Way is a WAY of LIFE, not the way of a brief moment in time. The groups have always started with Luke’s Gospel, because at least when they start, I’m still in control! (Never make a non-biblical book the center of the Bible Study Group’s study, no matter how long it has been on the bestseller list.) Once started, they go from Bible book to Bible book at will, and once started they never stop. Only three or four groups in all these years have fizzled out for one reason or another. I have been through the Gospel of Luke at least thirty times, and it usually takes over two years, with a short summer break, to get through it. Yet nobody is more eager than I am to study Luke again. Luke raises nearly every question in life, one way or another. And in a true Bible Study Group, there are no pat answers.

Many people have been in Bible Study Groups that are not at all like what I’m talking about. I have come to think of the kind I’m talking about as “Disciple Bands” because people study together, pray together, and share together on whatever level of honesty and intimacy they choose. It is *not* an indoctrination class. We study for an hour and then make ourselves stop. Then one of us shares something about their own life, for about half an hour, including questions and comments afterward. And then we part until the next time. We meet each week or it loses continuity. We make a pact to come to every meeting unless we are more than sixty miles away or very sick. Many times, people break the sixty-mile rule and fly back in time to make the meetings. It is a very simple but intentional pattern on the outside. But when the Spirit blesses, it is anything but “simple” on the inside.

I have seen Disciple Bands, as I prefer to call them, resurrect churches; transform Sunday Schools; spark efforts to help people (never “the poor” in general, though some of the people who have been helped happened to be poor); build true and deep friendships; turn church committees into exciting “workshops” of the church; become the active evangelism agency of the church. And of course, I have seen many individuals come into a new and different relationship with Jesus. You may choose not to believe me, but this is not theory.

A COMMENT ABOUT INDOCTRINATION

In many places, people come into Christianity via a process that starts out “knowing all the answers.” “We have all the answers. And when *you* get them right, you will be saved.” While I cannot swallow (stomach) this approach, I do think a lot of people are helped by it, at least in the beginning. Life is hard, and complex. Knowing some “right answers” can be exceedingly comforting, and may help get things started. Unfortunately, it often shuts things down shortly after they get started.

So I believe that a Disciple Band must be a place of open, honest inquiry. I note that Jesus took this approach with His own disciples. That is, He worked with them, taught them, walked with them – waiting for them to come to their own awakenings and realizations. “*Who do you say that I am?*” (Luke 9:18-20) That question is not toward the beginning. That is toward the end.

Do I pretend that I don’t care what people end up believing? Ridiculous! I have some pretty strong opinions, and beyond them some beliefs that transform and guide my life. Even so, faith is not the same as belief. Faith is TRUST, and is far more important than belief. So of course I have a tendency to want everybody to believe as I do. It is so exciting and important to me, why wouldn’t I want it for everybody I care about? So I struggle, in every Bible Study Group I am part of, for the “acceptance” of my beliefs. I do! On the other hand, I do not want anybody to fake it, pretend it, or claim they believe something they do not truly believe. That only gets us to the kind of foolishness and pretense that the church tries to run on too much of the time today. That is, even if something is true but I don’t truly believe it, it is not fuel enough to run on in the heat of the day, never mind the big temptations and the real storms. So I never want anybody to believe anything *just* because I do, and certainly not just because I say it. We are each in a Disciple Band to keep searching, honing, exploring, praying, challenging our beliefs – and each other’s – until we hit something solid enough that we know we can stand on it. (Philippians 2:12)

I have never been in a Disciple Band where I did not end up with friends – people I really love – who did *not* agree with everything I believe, and most certainly not with the way I said or explained it. They have to

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live their own lives and, beyond anything we can share, they must be faithful to our Lord according to their own best understanding. When the chips are down for them, it has to be their beliefs and their faith that carry them according to the Spirit as they hear and obey it. If I can pressure a person into a belief, I have only created a thin veneer. If they come to believe it truly, from their own center, it is light for their darkness, as mine is for me.

At this point someone nearly always says, “But that is so subjective!” Is being subjective a bad thing for you? I am a subject, not just an object. Subjective thinking is always superior to objective thinking – if we care about meaning, purpose, or truth. It is also more dangerous. Real life always is. Nevertheless, we have no choice. If we want meaning, truth, purpose, or faith of any kind in our lives, we must go to subjective thinking. Otherwise we can only deal with facts and never posit what any of them might mean. And a million facts can never add up to a single truth. Do you really think that “I love you” is an objective statement? God is love, and Christianity is about love. So if you don’t want to get subjective, you cannot track or understand or participate. “Oh, but that’s anthropomorphic thinking,” some will say. But *anthropos* = human being, and I happen to be *anthropos*. What do you think *you* are? So if I do not understand God anthropomorphically, I do not understand period.

Consequently, Bible Study in a Disciple Band is slow. It takes patience, time, listening to each other – sometimes returning to a passage we thought we had finished. We have to keep telling ourselves, “It doesn’t matter how many verses we covered, only how much we learned.” It takes time to care about each other. Why do you think so few people really do? “Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense.” If we are in a hurry for results, we are not on THE Path.

LEADERSHIP

Teachers can be wonderful, if they are not dictatorial or narrow-minded. But Bible Study Groups can manage just fine on their own, as the early church had to (for at least two generations) with only occasional visits from Paul or Peter or Apollos coming through town.

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NAYSAYERS

I have often been told, “Oh, we tried Bible Study in our church but it doesn’t work here. Nobody is interested.” Strange that wherever I have been, people are hungry for honest sharing, for more knowledge of the Bible, and especially for a deepening of their spiritual walk – a closer relationship with the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord – though they might not use that exact language for it.

So we are back to the issue of honesty. When we are honest with each other, it gives the Spirit room to work with us. When we pretend, when we only mouth the words, when it is “all cut-and-dried,” it gets really boring. Don’t believe me – test it out. Think of a person or two who really bores you. So what’s the problem? You care about lots of people; you find some people really interesting. So why do these other people bore you? Do they have low IQs? Do they have bigger problems, or perhaps fewer problems? Every reason I come up with fails, because I know other people with similar problems or issues whom I find very interesting. The one common denominator with people who keep me yawning is that they are not honest. They say nothing real. They share nothing of their true selves, or of their inner lives.

By the way, from time to time a Disciple Band will encounter some person who comes into the group without true intentions. That’s nothing new. The New Testament warns us about wolves and troublemakers of various kinds. Some people just want to argue, and they have no intention of finding or committing to anything. Some people are so self-focused that they have no real interest in Jesus or what Jesus might want for them. And on and on. This is clearly a problem. But if the group remains intentional, it all keeps working out. That is, after a while the group will realize what’s happening and start to ask the honest questions: “Why do you keep sidetracking every discussion?” “Are you finding anything personally meaningful – anything you are incorporating into your real life?” “Do you really like or care about anyone in this group? We don’t remember ever hearing you affirm or appreciate any of us in any way.” The honesty will either wake the person up or drive them out. We hope for the first, but the second is also a reality for every authentic Disciple Band. It always takes some courage to confront in this way. But we need to keep reminding ourselves that the other members of the group – and the purpose of the group – are worth a lot. On rare occasion

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you may find yourself in a group where the majority of the participants are not intentional. If after much prayer and discernment you come to this conclusion, you have to find or start another group. But don't give up easily. The Spirit may have sent you for a purpose.

SHARING

Initially, people have a tendency to slight the sharing. We start out thinking that other people are interesting, but who would be interested in us? Yet it is not enough to only get to know the story of Jesus better. We also have to get to know each other better, if we are to become a true Disciple Band. This is not just for interest or entertainment. We never know what challenges will come – for one of us, or for the group as a whole. If the bonds are not strong, sometimes we will be overwhelmed. The easiest, simplest way I know of to strengthen the bonds is for one member of the group to spend some time at the end of each meeting to let us in a little further to where they have come from, what their spiritual journey is like at this point, what they are facing, what they care about. From time to time, of course, a member of the group will come to the meeting with a current problem or heartbreak that needs the group's attention right away. Because the sharing time is already part of the format, it is easy for that person to switch with the scheduled sharer.

This is not psychotherapy. Mostly we just need to learn to truly listen to each other. It takes time for the trust to grow, and there is no reason to rush it. But after a while, the sharing gets better and better. Not more startling; just more honest, and calm. And the bonds do grow. Mostly we notice it when looking back. But do not cheat on the sharing. Do not allow it to become mere travelogues or “show and tell” sessions. Even those are fine, if accompanied by some personal dimensions of what is important and meaningful to the person sharing.

I repeat: The Scripture study is essential. But if we are walking the Path together, letting each other in on our own stories is essential as well.

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IN SUMMARY

After fifty years, it is hard for me to understand how anybody can survive if they do not have a Disciple Band. I strongly suspect that in many ways, they do *not* survive. Like the lone kid on the playground, they keep getting beat up, with nobody to help. In this case, by Satan.

I love to preach and teach. Some folk think I'm pretty good at it. But you can preach and teach forever and it will not grow the church, and I don't mean numbers. Numbers are a relatively unimportant side effect. Over the years, I have tried to preach better and better, and the same goes for teaching classes. And lots of folk say afterwards, "That was a really fine sermon, Pastor." But I have noticed that the only people who really "get it" – who get the point or message of the sermon or teaching – are the Bible Study people. Preaching and teaching is like throwing a bucket of water at a row of narrow-necked bottles. It's nobody's fault, but only a few drops get in. If we want it, we have to get our hands into it. We have to risk getting known. We have to take the chance of looking stupid and asking dumb questions. That's more than a risk, for certain. If we want it to be real – and to get real ourselves – we have to get into a Disciple Band.

So now I'll cheat: Whose idea was it to form Disciple Bands? Who bet His entire purpose and ministry on "The Twelve"? If we want to be His followers, maybe we should try following His lead. His Disciple Bands conquered the Roman Empire – groups of friends against armies with swords of steel – but the gates of Hell could not prevail against them. Is it too late for us?