

DISCIPLESHIP: GETTING BELOW THE SURFACE FOR LASTING CHANGE

By PR

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Have you ever noticed that people will pull out diplomas or workbooks from trainings and schools they've been to as a sort of proof that they know a subject? We often see people go through trainings, be it in business, development or spiritual subjects, and perhaps they can even repeat back what was taught, but does it mean that anything has really changed in their lives?

I call this 'putting a veneer' on. We put a veneer of knowledge over deep-seated beliefs and functional theology, but if we do not address these deeper areas we do not see real lasting change. This is frustrating to us, and it is frustrating to our disciples who are new creatures in Christ and want to change.

Ideas have Consequences

We can see this dynamic by borrowing an illustration called 'Ideas Have Consequences' from the book *Discipling Nations* by Darrow Miller. You have a tree. The roots represent beliefs, the trunk values, the branches behaviour and the fruit consequences. The branches and fruit, meaning behaviour and consequences, grow out of our deep-seated beliefs and values. Much secular training, development and unfortunately also Christian discipleship, often address issues at the branch or behavioural level. An illustration of this in development work is public health campaigns to combat AIDS. The programs target behaviour by giving out condoms to address the consequences. However, they never address the beliefs that spawn the behaviour that creates the consequences. Addressing the top part of the tree is like trying to paste apples on an orange tree. You are not going to see lasting change.

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Let's look at an example from business. An American came to Morocco to start a school. She partnered with a Moroccan director who had much experience in starting and managing schools. You can imagine her shock when the Moroccan director began to gossip and slander the Moroccan secretary. The American could not understand why. Well, the Moroccan director has her beliefs: get her before she gets me; only one can win and that will be me; you cannot trust others. The Westerner has her beliefs: trust until someone shows

they are untrustworthy; if we all work together, we all win. So, imagine a Western business management seminar comes teaching these Western beliefs and assumptions. Is the Moroccan director going to adopt them? She may be able to repeat back what she was taught to do (and she will have her workbook and diploma to prove that she knows it), but when she feels threatened, she will revert to her old behaviours because her underlying beliefs have not changed. Let's take an example now from Christian discipleship. I was in France working in a group of women believers from Muslim backgrounds. We were discussing childrearing. We started by looking at what they had learned from their Muslim upbringing, what they had learned from French society and finally what the Bible says. We looked at what we could keep from the past and what needed to be discarded. They needed to understand what beliefs they were bringing with them from their past in order to truly apply the Bible and see real change. One of the women said: 'We grew up in Muslim homes, in a French secular society, but you are teaching us a new way, a North African Christian way to live and think.'

Here is another example from Christian discipleship. I was present at a Moroccan ladies' study in the city where I live. The woman leading the study had been horrified to learn that one of the ladies had lied to get out of a difficult situation. So, we did a study looking at all of the verses that talk about honesty and not lying. Frankly, the lady who lied knew all of these verses and in fact, she did not want to lie, but when things got tough, she reverted to old behaviours. Why is this? Why do Christians who know they should not lie, and do not want to lie, lie anyway? What are the beliefs that spawn this behaviour? Well, you have the desire to avoid consequences and also the need to save face, both of which are strong beliefs that drive this behaviour. What does lying say about what we believe about God? It says: He is not near, he does not want to help or he cannot help.

If we look deep enough, we see that sinful behaviour finds its roots in deep idolatry – wrong views and beliefs about God which play themselves out in our behaviour. David Powlison points out the connection between this idolatry and exterior behaviour: 'Exterior behaviour is motivated from the inside by complex life-driving patterns of thoughts, desires and fears... of which a person may be almost wholly unaware. Motivation is always God – relational either of faith or of idolatry.'¹

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1 Powlison, David. "Basic Biblical Concepts of Human Motivation," in Resources for Changing Lives, Glenside, PA: Publisher, date, pp.

So we need to help people look beyond the behaviour to the beliefs and even deeper to the idolatrous beliefs about God that are behind the behaviour and we need to address those. With the issue of lying, I think it would have been more helpful to use a story from the Bible; perhaps Abraham's saying Sarah was his sister. Stories provide a good way to look at the issue and ask questions about motivation and faith.

Discipling for Change using the Case of Marriage

In order to see how this works itself out, let's think through the issue of marriage. What beliefs do people in your country bring with them into marriage? In Morocco, there are two principle beliefs that cause problems. (1) You cannot trust someone else. So, it's my family and I against him and his family. Lying and manipulation are the norm. (2) Marriage is basically a business transaction built on what each one gets out of it. The wife gets the status of being a wife, a mother and of being provided for. The husband gets children, sex and someone to take care of his home.

Many books and approaches about marriage just address changing behaviours, which is again like trying to paste oranges onto an apple tree. However, we have to begin with beliefs. We always take people back to Genesis to address wrong beliefs and build new ones. Have you ever noticed in the story of Genesis 1 that after God created just about everything, he said it was good, but when he created man and he was alone, it was 'not good', and when the woman is given to him, it was 'very good'? *The marriage relationship is meant for good.* It is also meant for relationship, not just a business transaction. How that works itself out in each culture will look different, but I believe it has a biblical basis. We teach this and then we teach people to do spiritual warfare, that is, to resist the lies of Satan about marriage, with the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, and to preach to themselves these truths of God's word. In order to do this, we need to discuss with them the lies that are believed in the culture about marriage.

In the rest of the Genesis story, we address the issues of leaving your father and mother. A local believer was telling me that her husband was feeling quite neglected because every time they planned to do something together (they really did love each other, having grown up together and having chosen to marry each other), her family arrived and their plans were put on hold. He felt he always took a back seat to her family, often having to give up his bed as the family stayed over and had to divide up men in the living room and women in the bedroom. Anyway, they ended up telling her family that they were welcome any time, but if the couple had planned to do something, the family

was welcome to stay at their house, but they would proceed with their plans. They also said the family was welcome to stay over in function of who fit in the living room because they would not be giving up their bedroom any longer. The family accused them of being selfish.

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I was rather shocked by what they had decided – it did not seem very culturally appropriate – but then I remembered something I had read, again in Darrow Miller's book. He was talking about individualistic cultures, which he calls the One, and community-based cultures, which he calls the Many. Miller proposed that as Christians we pursue a Many/One model based on the Trinity. One element of this is what he calls sanctified self-interest. It's true that in the Many culture, the many impose their will. In the One culture, the one pursues his will. In the Many/One culture, there will be a balance. I wondered if this believing family had exercised this sanctified self-interest in trying

to negotiate this idea of leaving your father and mother. This story also illustrates that it's often easier to identify the wrong beliefs than to figure out what to do about them and that cultures are not neutral but have their own sinful patterns and applications.

Lastly, we look at the fall in Genesis and the tendency for men to dominate and women to manipulate. At the heart of this there is a lack of trust, a need to protect oneself by any means one has. What does this say about what people think about God? Is he able to protect them? Can He give power to trust? Can He give grace to forgive when hurt has been given? Can they use their spiritual weapons against the fear and mistrust that Satan will tempt them with? We need to look at the one-flesh aspect of marriage, which has no place for the belief it's my family and I against him and his family, or that only one person can win and it will be me.

We just looked at marriage as an example of how to begin to think more deeply about addressing discipleship issues. We need to approach all of life from this perspective. Now, sometimes we do not see change in the people we disciple because they are not really converted. In my observation, there are often two stages in Muslims' conversions (I cannot explain this biblically, it is just an observation). There is an initial intellectual acceptance of the beliefs of Christianity. They will agree that Jesus is the Son of God; He died on the cross, etc. They often will begin to refer to themselves as Christians. However, there needs to be the next step of true conversion. Sometimes we are a bit too quick to pronounce people Christians based on the fact that they accept certain Christian doctrine. They have changed their creed but not necessarily experienced new life in Christ. This is a problem because then you have people

going around saying they are Christians but living like the world, and this is a very bad testimony especially to their families.

A colleague uses an exercise to help determine where people are spiritually. He draws out a soccer (football!) pitch. He puts one guy outside the stadium walking in, others in the stands, one on the sideline and others in the heat of the game. He then asks people to say which person they are regarding their relationship to Christ. Often, I think that we tolerate behaviours in our disciples that we should not. Sometimes our standards are not high enough. It's like we are desperate for converts. Sometime we need to tell people straight out that Christians do not act in certain ways, and if they continue acting like that maybe they are not really converted.²

So in conclusion, we need to help people examine their deep-seated beliefs, the baggage they've brought with them into their new lives in Christ, in order for them to effectively apply biblical truth and see deep lasting change.

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References

Miller, Darrow. *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures*. YWAM Publishing, 1998.

Powlison, David. 'Basic Biblical Concepts of Human Motivation', in *Resources for Changing Lives*. Glenside PA: No Publisher, No date.

Powlison, David, 'Idols of the Heart and "Vanity Fair"', *The Journal of Biblical Counselling*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1995, pp. 35-50.

2 Some tools to help you think further about this are the book I mentioned by Darrow Miller, *Discipling Nations*, as well as material published by the Christian Counselling and Education Foundation, www.ccef.org. The CCEF has published books such as *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, *Age of Opportunity and Sacred Marriage*. All of their material is geared to addressing behaviour at the level of belief and idolatry or faith.