

Experiential Faith Discipleship

by W. Evans

Our dependence in discipleship must be on God the Holy Spirit, not on methods. Methods will vary according to circumstances and individuals, both the discipler and the disciple. A number of methods are available. You may find that one of these suits your personality and approach to discipleship. Or you may want to develop a method of your own. Rather than advocating methods, I would like to suggest some goals of discipleship, what we will want to see produced in the lives of the disciples through the process.

Effective discipleship should bring the believer to the following:

1. **A meaningful understanding of the Gospel.** This implies a biblical understanding of oneself as a sinner, of what God has done to save him from sin, and an experience of the miracle of new birth. These three points are particularly important for those coming out of Islam, where they are unknown or denied and where conversion is seen as mere change of religion. I begin with a study of the first three chapters of Genesis, along with Genesis 5:1-2, as the groundwork upon which these truths can be understood and received. Then we move into the first ten verses of Ephesians chapter two, to help the disciple understand the implications to himself as a son of Adam. And thirdly, we look at John 1:12,13, and John 3:1-16 to underline what Christ has done, how he must respond, and what happens when he does. This obviously is only a bare foundation upon which much building must yet be done, but I have found it to be a very helpful beginning.
2. **A meaningful submission to the Lordship of Christ.** It is important to make clear to a Muslim that Christian faith is not merely assent to a doctrine, but rather relationship to a person. He must understand and experience that that relationship involves a total committal of himself to his Lord; a true "Islam" in the sense of submission to the true God through Jesus Christ.
3. **An experiential appropriation of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.** This implies knowledge of His Person, recognition of His indwelling in the believer, and sensitivity to His ministry of convicting, guiding, teaching, sanctifying, and empowering for service. Only as the new believer is responsive to these ministries will he or she make significant or sustained growth as a Christian. Many of us as western Christians have been strong on teaching the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but weak in modeling the experiential life of the Spirit.
4. **A vital experience of worship,** rather than merely replacing Muslim rituals with Christian rituals. Unless that element of spirituality is obviously demonstrated in the life of the discipler it cannot

effectively be inculcated in the disciple. In the Arab country where growth of the MB church has been the most successful, the atmosphere of worship in church gatherings has been a key factor. This has developed largely through the living example of a national Christian woman who developed strong habits of prayer and worship during a period when she was largely isolated from Christian fellowship and which she passed on, probably largely unconsciously, to younger believers when she was again in a situation where she was able to have church fellowship.

5. **A living experience of prayer,** rather than just saying prayers, even though they may be Christian prayers rather than Muslim ones. One of the first questions a sincere inquirer will ask is "How do Christians pray?". While he is probably thinking at that point of a Christian ritual which would replace the Muslim ritual, it is an excellent starting point for teaching and modeling prayer as sincere and extemporaneous dialogue with God, as well as meaningful usage of the Lord's Prayer of Matt. 5:5-12. I have also found it helpful to show scriptural examples of multiple postures in and forms of prayer, emphasizing the spirit of prayer as infinitely more important than the form.
6. **Meaningful fellowship with other Christians,** i.e., positive participation in the Body of Christ, especially with those of his own country and background. There are multiple

examples of believers in the Arab-Muslim world who have a seemingly sincere committal to the Lordship of Christ, and yet very minimal or nil committal to the Body of Christ. Breakdown in inter-personal relationships is probably the single greatest factor hindering the establishing of ongoing churches in this part of the world. Widespread mistrust, and especially mistrust of an ex-Muslim who now professes to be a Christian, militates against such fellowship. Replacing such negative attitudes with positive ones, coupled with positive experiences of meeting and relating to fellow believers, is essential. Unless the barrier is overcome, there cannot be healthy growth into being a productive member of the Christian community.

7. **A viable pattern for spiritual growth.** This will imply the disciple's ability to derive his own nourishment from God's Word, rather than rely on being spoon-fed by the discipler's teaching. The most effective way I have found to do this is in using a simple inductive study method, asking questions which require careful thinking through of the text in question until the disciple himself discovers the answer in the Word. I do this in the context of specific passages, rather than isolated texts, so enabling the believer to discover the truth in context. The majority of our western discipleship programs are topic-oriented, with proof texts chosen willy-nilly from the Bible.

This may be an effective way of teaching Christian doctrines, but it leaves the disciple with a weak knowledge of the Bible as such, and ill-prepared to study it on his own. The uncertainty of how long any particular discipling process might continue was a significant stimulus to me to bring the disciple to the Bible as a whole, to study passages or books rather than looking up proof texts. The discipling relationship might be terminated at any time by any number of circumstances, often beyond the control of either one of us. I seek to bring the new believer as soon as possible to the point of being able to glean spiritual truth and nourishment from his own independent reading and study of the Bible without me there to explain it all to him.

8. **A viable pattern of witness.** In the Arab-Muslim world, this pattern will not likely be an immediate, verbal proclamation of faith on the part of the new believer. Such will almost certainly have negative rather than positive results in ostracizing the new believer from his family and friends. It may also put him under such intense opposition so soon in his faith that he is unable to stand the pressure, and is forced back into the acquiescence of Islam. A viable pattern of witness will be that which will permit the new believer to develop in his new faith, will allow him to exercise a positive influence in the context of his witness, and will evoke, inasmuch as possible, positive rather

than negative reactions to that witness. Jim Peterson, in his book *Evangelism As A Lifestyle*, emphasizes the importance of affirmation of the Gospel to proclamation of the Gospel. This concept is extremely important in the Arab-Muslim world. Proclamation of the Gospel is very unlikely to produce positive fruit unless prepared by consistent affirmation of the Gospel. I use Matthew 5:13-16 and 1 Peter 3:15-16 as the biblical basis for affirmation of the Gospel before proclamation of the Gospel. I discourage the new disciple from immediate verbal proclamation of his faith. I encourage him to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" through changed attitudes, speech patterns, and actions in the context of his home and neighborhood. As those around him see the change in his life, questions as to the reason for that change will almost certainly be evoked. Those questions, according to 1 Peter 3:15, give him the opportunity for verbal proclamation of his faith.

In conclusion we sum up some measures to be taken to realize these objectives in discipling.

1. It has been said that character and conduct are "caught more effectively than taught". In other words, **the discipler must model in his own life the principles he hopes to see reproduced in the disciple.** Teaching without modeling will almost certainly be ineffective. Remember that it is the living experience of the Christian faith that we are aiming at, rather

than the perfect understanding of its doctrines.

2. **Always be available, but guard against possessiveness in the relationship.** I have found that Arab world people tend to be possessive in their relationships, creating the type of exclusiveness mentioned above. Introducing the new believer to other Christians, especially from among his own compatriots, and involving them with him in the discipleship process should be normative practice. Needless to say, this must be done carefully and sensitively to allay mistrust and fear and build godly relationships.
3. **Train the new believer to use the Word,** rather than just "spoon-feeding" in teaching the Word.
4. **Utilize natural relationship networks** as much as possible. I have found in working with media contacts that an inquirer will often appear at our first meeting with a trusted friend to whom he has already confided at least some of his interest, or faith, in Christianity. In one instance, the correspondence course student whom I first contacted has emigrated to the U.S. and I have lost all contact with him. The friend who was with him at that first meeting has continued in the faith in his native land, bringing several others to faith in the course of his pilgrimage.
5. **Think and plan for community right from the beginning, don't just deal with individuals.** I have observed too many cases where the discipling process has produced 'show-case' Christians with little allegiance to or involvement in the Christian community in their vicinity.
6. **Be patient but firm in insisting on biblical standards of honesty, purity, etc., in the life of the MBB.** Anything less will produce sub-standard believers who will sooner or later turn back or be neutralized.