

TUTORIAL
7.22

Equipped for service

This tutorial introduces the fourth and fifth questions in the area of *Discipleship*: ‘Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?’ and ‘Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?’

Last time

We considered how God is committed, not only to communicating Truth, but also to helping His people know how to live it out in real ways that contribute to His purposes.

We looked at the example of David and how God’s interaction with him was not only on a sacred, spiritual level, but also in the real challenges, victories and even failures of life. We also highlighted how these same principles worked out in Jesus’ relationship with His disciples as He shared the big, overarching truths about God with them but also gave very down to earth, specific instructions in light of the task He was equipping them for.

We then focused on the way Jesus wants to use relationships between His disciples to help them in following Him. We briefly considered what it might look like to have genuine, healthy friendships that are intentional but without being manipulative or overbearing.

The fourth question under “D” for *Discipleship*

- Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?
- Are they being helped to apply the general truth from God’s Word to their own specific real-life situations?
- Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?

- Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?
- Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?

Disciples of Christ working together

The picture of discipleship we've been developing here is of Jesus leading His followers on their own unique paths as He calls and encourages them to walk with Him. He is eager for them to see themselves "yoked" or bonded to Him, not to add to the burdens of life, but so He can share them. Following a Master who sacrificed everything for others does involve giving some things up, but they are things that won't last anyway, and what is gained is eternal. Even though disciples follow individual paths, they regularly intersect with others briefly or for a lifetime; sometimes being *helped*, sometimes *helping*, and most often *helping each other* to follow Jesus.

As we consider the fourth question under "Discipleship" we want to add some more detail to that picture, focusing in on how the Lord brings a number of His disciples' paths together for His purposes. At times groups of disciples work together for specific projects or specialised aspects of His Commission to make disciples to the "ends of the earth", but by far the most important convergences are when they come together as local churches. Whatever connotations "church" might have, particularly in individualistic, consumerist cultures, from God's perspective these *disciple gatherings* are not a matter of chance or just personal preference for things like worship styles. Somehow, He's able to give genuine freedom of choice to His disciples while, at the same time, sovereignly blending their gifts and abilities so as to give the best opportunity for individuals to thrive and for the group to serve His purposes.

But as we've noted many times, God pursues genuine partnerships with His people, and this is no more true than in the process of individual disciples being encouraged to use the gifts and abilities He's given them within the local Body and as it reaches out. As we picture how an existing or future ministry might develop, when we hear others talk about programs and strategies, or if we're trying to get a clear view of an existing situation, this is a critical area to include. Here are the kinds of relevant questions we might ask ourselves depending on the context:

- Am I committed to helping other disciples of Jesus thrive in areas He has gifted them for, even if it means them overtaking me and being more appreciated than I am?

- Is our concept of “the team” a healthy, Biblical one or does it unthinkingly exclude brothers and sisters based on extraneous factors like education, background, ethnicity, etc?
- Does this model take people out of the context of the church and train them to an elite status that only a few can hope to attain at the risk of stifling other potential within the Body?
- Is this situation such that someone might be concerned about losing status, control, even financial security, if they really encourage others to function fully in their area of gifts and abilities?
- Do the leaders of the church have a proactive strategy for offering real opportunities for service, identifying those best suited, and ensuring that they are equipped and disciplined for those roles?

Perhaps these few questions serve to highlight the reality that an atmosphere in which Jesus’ disciples are consistently encouraged to function in areas for which they’re gifted doesn’t just happen as a matter of course. Often the obstacles are a *personal* lack of awareness and vision, or even simple indifference and laziness. After all, it takes real commitment and willingness to invest time and energy into someone else who may or may not respond as we believe they should. The possibility of frustration and personal disappointment is not something everyone is able to face, especially if they apply a “once bitten twice shy” principle. Often too, it really does seem more efficient and easier to follow another dictum, “If you want to do the job well, do it yourself.”

But Jesus would not have entrusted the founding of His Church to the apostles and its building to subsequent generations of disciples if He took that approach. Within that initial group of twelve followers He dealt with immaturity, lack of faith, cowardice and even outright betrayal. And down through history since He has been willing to graciously persist with disciples, not one of whom has ever completely fulfilled their potential or used their gifts as they might have. Obviously though, He knows that the investment is worth the cost; the reward of finally seeing a disciple step up to the plate of His Cause makes up for all the disappointments; every choice to serve beats a thousand failures to respond, hands down.

Discipleship functioning in the church

At times the obstacles are not so much personal as *systemic*. In many settings history has played a significant role in shaping beliefs and assumptions about *ecclesiology* - i.e. theology applied to the nature and structure of the Church. Even within what are called *evangelical* circles (a term that has lost much of its definition in recent times) there exists a wide range of models, from the highly organised and hierarchical to the amorphous and unstructured. Without taking the time and space here to trace this out, we can see how both extremes are often not conducive to disciples of Jesus being encouraged to function in areas for which they have the gifts and abilities. In general, churches with a

strong emphasis on structure also tend to preserve influential roles for those few with formal theological and academic qualifications. At the other end of the spectrum, groups that see themselves as loosely bound communities of believers can be so egalitarian that there is an inbuilt resistance to anyone using gifts related to leadership or authority, even the appropriate kind that is based on God's Word. But even the great number of true churches that fill the middle ground between the two poles can have long-held assumptions and traditions that stifle the potential growth of individuals. Groups that are being impacted in continually fresh ways by the Truth review this regularly and honestly, making adjustments to ensure they are creating opportunities for non-specialist, less established, newer and younger disciples to demonstrate their God-given gifts and abilities to serve the Church locally and further afield.

It's also worth noting that there can be *cultural* obstacles. Back in Tutorial 7.13 we considered some cultural spectrums that relate to *Identity*. Those that focus on contrasting views of authority and status are also very relevant to this area of Discipleship we're addressing here. For example, a church that exists in a *High Power Distance* community (where inequalities in authority and status are accepted as inevitable, power is held close and distinctions are accentuated) can unthinkingly perpetuate a wide gulf between those with authority and those who have none. Similarly, a church in what's termed an *Ascribed Status* culture (that views prestige as inherent in the person and difficult to lose, where power is automatic and related to social class or affiliations, and where titles are important) will have to consciously work against those cultural defaults. The evidence of God's Word is all against the idea of the Spirit giving gifts to God's people based on status or family connections. There's certainly good reasons to respect the wisdom that can come with age, and there's nothing inherently wrong with titles, but discipleship is suffocated when older members and those in positions of authority aren't actively encouraging the next generation and giving opportunities for ministry to all other qualified members of the fellowship.

Paternalism vs. Discipleship

One way of describing the conditions that either inhibit or promote an atmosphere in which all of God's children are able to grow in their gifts and fulfil their God-given potential is to contrast *paternalism* with *discipleship*. (Note that paternalism is most often a description used in cross-cultural work, but it is equally apt in other situations as well. Also note that it's not only men who can have the attitudes we're describing here under either of these terms.)

Paternalism is the assumption of innate superiority – which might be based on education, social status, material possessions, technological know-how or sometimes even the assumption of spiritual superiority. *Paternalism* always condescendingly comes from above. In its most foundational sense, it describes a person taking the position of father or mother and relating to those around them as children who will always need guidance, protection and

discipline. *Paternalism* serves to perpetuate the status quo, and has a stifling effect on the growth of younger or newer believers because they are not trusted and aren't placed in positions of responsibility, where they would have opportunities to grow by trusting the Lord. *Paternalism* is often short-sighted and only views people in terms of the shortcomings and lacks that exist now, rather than the potential for the future. Often people are only accepted or valued on the basis of their performance, and failure is met with disapproval rather than being seen as an opportunity for growth.

Discipleship, by contrast, is based on our relationship with the Lord and our understanding of how He relates to us. The true discipler wants to see this believer, student or co-worker grow to his or her own level of maturity and beyond. They are not content for the relationship to be a static one, because they expect others to become mature as they interact with God and His Word. Unlike paternalism – which passes judgment arbitrarily on each situation as it arises – discipleship looks for the underlying principle to pass on so that the other person is then equipped to deal with similar issues in the future. The paternalist acts like a referee – someone whose only involvement in the game is to see the rules are enforced, whereas the discipler sees him or herself in the temporary position of playing coach. *Discipleship* works *alongside* another person – it empathises and associates with the one being disciplined – it looks forward to the time when this person is better equipped to play their part within God's purposes. For the true discipler, his or her own status doesn't enter into the picture because they are intent on doing all they can to help bring the other person to a level of maturity in Christ.

Paternalism	Discipleship
– assumes superiority	– wants to bring about equality
– parent - child relationship	– sibling - sibling relationship
– perpetuates status quo	– has a goal and purpose
– protects knowledge and position	– freely shares insights and roles
– defines a vision for others	– draws others to God's purpose and vision
– thinks in the immediate	– has a view to the big picture
– judges arbitrarily	– defines relevant principles
– responds to failure with disapproval	– sees failures as an opportunity for equipping
– referee	– playing coach

Some extra questions

To go along with the fourth question in the area of *Discipleship*, ‘Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?’ we can also ask:

- *Are they being disciplined into areas of service or are they being held back by personal, systemic or cultural barriers?*
- *Are opportunities being created for the expression of spiritual gifts and is there scope for people to explore appropriate ways to use their experience and skills?*
- *Is there a paternalism that stifles the growth of younger, newer and less mature believers OR is there a vision for discipleship that actively works to bring them to places of equality and hands authority over in a timely way?*

The fifth question under “D” for *Discipleship*

- Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?
- Are they being helped to apply the general truth from God’s Word to their own specific real-life situations?
- Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?
- Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?
- Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?

Facilitating discipleship

Up to this point, it has been mainly the natural colours and shades of relationships and the “organic” connections with Christ and His Body that have made up the portrait of discipleship that has emerged. But now, as we discuss this fifth and final question, it’s important to recognise that defining some firmer outlines on the picture doesn’t have to detract from the beauty that God has built into it. The key here is being sure that any structures or programs do actually facilitate the relationships that help Jesus’ disciples to grow and be better equipped, and avoid the trap of becoming ends in themselves. The need to do this - to avoid this trap - provides a compelling argument for the local church being heavily engaged in preparing its members for roles of

service, whether as part of the Body in its local community or as an extension into other communities.

It's not our purpose here to debate the relative benefits of Christian tertiary education or academic theological studies - obviously there are cultural contexts and denominational traditions that value them highly and see them as indispensable. Strong arguments are put forward for the benefits of maintaining a rigorous standard in theology and Christian education. A case is also made for certain specialist training (e.g. for cross-cultural workers, missionaries etc.) to take place on campuses where students rub shoulders with others headed to similar ministries and with experienced field practitioners. Whatever the potential benefits, these educational and training programs do run the risk of taking on a life of their own, a life that exists outside of the discipleship and oversight of the local church. Churches that are committed to discipleship principles may use these facilities for some components of equipping their members, but they don't abdicate responsibility for their care to professional educators, experts in a particular field or so-called *para-church* organisations. Godly parents, mature believers and leaders within the church who've developed relationships of trust with younger believers, for example, continue to maintain those friendships, helping them process new information and experiences - they don't abdicate responsibility, assuming that everything their people are exposed to in Christian establishments will help them to follow Jesus or even to serve Him more effectively.

We're not trying to paint a picture of believers having every aspect of their lives micro-managed by their home fellowships, dictating choices about where they can or can't go to pursue avenues of work and ministry. But younger, newer believers need to know that they have access to good advice and counsel, and that others who've walked the road of discipleship ahead of them are keeping up to date on currents in the culture and trends within the wider Church. As they move forward in their careers and prepare to contribute to God's purposes, it is vital for them to be able to process decisions with other believers they like and respect, and whom they can trust to give positive, honest input.

Fellowships that are serious about playing a role in discipling their people in a wider sense, do their homework; based on their understanding from His Narrative, they articulate His perspectives and how He is working in the world; they define priorities for the kinds of efforts they will give the bulk of their resources to; they can speak intelligently to their people about different avenues, teams, and organisations they believe are committed to the same priorities and values; they work to understand the different challenges involved; they have thoughts too on what gifts and abilities are best suited to different roles; they have a level of understanding about what kinds of equipping are appropriate for those roles; they determine whether they, as a church, have the necessary resources to see their people equipped for roles

God is leading them together into; and they seek out what they are lacking or “out-source” where they lack.

All too often a dichotomy is perpetuated between full-time, “professional” or “supported” Christian ministries (e.g. pastors, missionaries, Christian counsellors) and other ways that people serve Jesus as His disciples (e.g. elders and deacons, “lay” teachers in the church, administrators, worship leaders, church Sunday school teachers, small group facilitators, witnesses in daily life). One problem with categorising roles in these different ways is the frequent assumption that yes, of course, those in the first group need training, while everyone else will just somehow learn to be effective through experience. Churches with a broader perspective of discipleship don’t make these assumptions; always against the backdrop of relational discipleship, they offer access to practical and, where appropriate, “technical” help to prepare their people beforehand as well as “on the job”.

Hopefully, through these resources we’ve made a compelling case for God’s Narrative itself being the primary equipping tool for disciples of Jesus, no matter what path He leads them on in their lives and service for Him. Any other additional training program or curriculum should be firmly tied in to that overarching perspective provided by God’s Word - a *Biblical theology* - and be a practical outworking of the principles and values it reveals.

Some extra questions

To go along with the fifth question in the area of *Discipleship*, ‘Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?’ we can also ask:

- *Is there a sense of responsibility taken in the church to be informed about current trends, needs and opportunities so that members can be given valid input as they move towards new opportunities for service?*
- *Are the ministry values, priorities and objectives of the church shared regularly with the whole Body, in smaller contexts, and in discipleship relationships?*
- *Does the church have a vital interest and sense of responsibility in seeing all members properly equipped to be effective disciple-makers, OR do they draw a false dichotomy between “full-time, professional, specialists ministries” and other “normal walks of life”?*

When Stefan decided to ride his bike to the university a different way than normal one morning, he was surprised to see a line of buses outside the old abandoned football stadium that was usually the haunt of graffiti artists and

drug dealers. Later he saw on a news site that the Munich city authorities had run out of apartments for all the Syrian refugees flooding in and were now housing them in *zeltlager* - tent camps - wherever they could find some empty space. As a kid he'd heard his grandparents talk about their escape from a grim, tyrannical Czech Republic back in the sixties, and how, although they were grateful to be granted asylum, what a struggle it was to build a new life here in West Germany, especially because not everyone welcomed them with open arms. His heart went out now to these latest refugees who'd lost everything in a nightmare war they had no part in starting. Coming from just east of the border, at least his grandparents had spoken some German when they arrived, but these Syrians faced the huge barrier of learning a completely new language. Talking to God, he wondered how he might be able to help and show them Jesus' love.

Two days later he met up for coffee with Max, a leader of the student Bible study group Stefan had joined when he moved to Munich a year ago to study graphic design. Max was probably in his late thirties or even forties, but he didn't really seem that old. It always surprised him a bit when he remembered that Max was part of the church pastoral staff, because he seemed like just a good friend now. Okay, he liked electronic music from the 80s and often wore checked shirts, but apart from that he was pretty cool. The small fourth floor apartment he shared with his wife Daniela and their dog Luther had become a home away from home for Stefan and some other students here in the big city.

Now, sitting in their favourite armchairs at the coffee shop where they always met up on Tuesday mornings, he casually mentioned to Max that he'd been thinking about maybe helping the Syrian refugees somehow. Max sat forward with an excited look on his face.

"It's amazing you bring that up," he said, "because the leadership team at church have been really burdened for those people. In fact, just the other day at our meeting we put that on our top five priorities for church projects. We did a bit of research and found a team that teaches *Deutsch als Zweitsprache* (German as a Second Language) to refugees. We think they might be believers, and wondered if we can partner somehow. We started praying about who from our fellowship might have an interest. I actually mentioned you as a possibility, but didn't know what you'd think."

Mapping out a plan became an excuse to order pastries. Stefan would find out more about the DZ team and report back. Max would let the leaders at church know and put out feelers for anyone else who'd be interested.

As it turned out, things moved quickly. Here he was already, Stefan thought, as he walked towards the community centre to meet his first Syrian family, only five weeks after mentioning the idea to Max. It had been an intense month of fast tracking for DZ certification in what is normally a six-week course, and

juggling that with normal studies. There had been a meeting with the refugee assistance organisation he'd be working with, which turned out to be quite loosely structured and only nominally "Christian".

He'd gotten together with the church leadership team three different times. They'd been very supportive, and to his surprise, had treated him...well, just like one of them really, even though they were older guys like Max. In amongst the encouragement and jokes about his feeble attempt to grow a "contextual" beard, there were some probing questions about how he would approach this new challenge. It turned out that the leaders had been doing their own studies, months before the whole refugee thing had occurred to him, and were surprisingly well informed about different nuances of Islam; some had even made the effort to download the syllabus of the DZ course he'd done and knew enough to talk about methods of teaching German. They'd really liked some thoughts he'd had about not forcing things with anyone, just focusing on building friendships and allowing God to move things in good directions in His timing. But they did want to know how he'd handle questions about Christianity if they came up, and they even did some role-play that was really helpful until it fell apart with laughter as Max overdid the aggressive devil's advocate role.

Last Sunday morning, Andreas, one of the pastors, had interviewed him in front of the whole fellowship and asked a few people to come up and pray for him. That night, immersed in an assignment on manipulating digital images, he got a call from Max to say that after the service three other people from church had asked about also doing something to help the refugees. But the biggest surprise was that the leadership team wanted him, Stefan, to consider heading up a "Refugee response" team and to work closely with them in the process. He wondered if he was really up for the responsibility, but Max felt he was and said that he'd be glad to be an honorary member of the team and get together with them all for as long as Stefan wanted him to.

"Okay, here goes," he thought, as he opened the door and walked into the brightly lit *gemeindezentrum* (community centre) where a stocky man with a beard, a lady with a headscarf and two kids were looking expectantly towards him.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Equipped for service

1. As you think back over your own path of discipleship so far please share anything you care to about any strengths or weaknesses you have noticed.

2. Imagine being involved in cross-cultural church planting in a previously unevangelised area: describe your “dream team” of partners and explain why you would choose to work with those people and that particular configuration.
3. Identify 6-10 features of relational discipleship in Stefan’s story with a brief explanation.
4. Please share anything you care to that has particularly stood out, that you’ve learned, that has impacted you, or perhaps that you have questions about in this picture of discipleship presented in Tutorials 7.19-7.22.