

# Discipleship Ministries

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

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## Introduction

Ministry: The Salvation Army, Compassion International, Answers in Genesis, the YWCA, Athletes in Action, 9Marks, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, The Dayton Gospel Mission, Spreading the Gospel of God Ministries, Pastor Russ, Upward Bound, Mothers of Preschoolers, The Center for Pioneer Church Planting, the Set-up Team, Children Desiring God... Ministry has varied meanings to many people, from social programs and benevolence opportunities to specific task-oriented events both large scale and personal.

At its core, the idea of ministry has to do with service. It involves action and activity. It is the doing or accomplishing the tasks set before us. From a Biblical perspective, it is effectively the carrying out of God's design and purposes. It is fulfilling our mandate given to us as early as in Genesis chapter one, to fill the earth with His image-bearers. It is a task given to each of us and abdicated by many as they reject God's design and rule. All of us who have been called by His grace and embrace the gospel in faith for our lives are to be engaged in this calling, it is not limited to some professional class. Accomplishing God's purposes and carrying out His plan has many facets and angles, which leads to many perspectives on ministry. However, much of what is proposed as ministry or ministries frequently loses its Biblical moorings and foundation.

That is why Russ began this series on ministry at Clearcreek Chapel by presenting to us a Biblical framework and mandate for ministry. From the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Russ pointed out that Biblical ministry is:

1. Marked by Christians who live worthy of our high calling...
2. Flourishes where a Christian lifestyle is expected...
3. Marked by humility and gentleness...
4. Maintains a unity created by the Holy Spirit...
5. Understands the centrality of God and the necessity for truth...
6. Prizes diversity in unity...
7. Enabled by God's grace...
8. Governed and guided by the teaching of gifted people given by the Lord...
9. Equips people to use their individual gifts and abilities...
10. Grows people in experience and maturity...
11. Discerns the dangers that tempt us to avoid what truly pleases God...
12. Embraces God's design...
13. Depends upon the working of God to produce its effects.

He concluded with these four assertions from John Stott regarding unity in ministry:

1. It depends on the charity of our character and conduct...
2. It arises from the unity of our God...
3. It is enriched by the diversity of our gifts...
4. It demands the maturity of our growth.

This morning I was assigned to present to you the basis and framework for “discipleship ministry” here at Clearcreek Chapel. To do so adequately we must begin with the fundamental question, exactly what is discipleship?

I have a number of excellent books on this topic in my library. Contained in these books are various presentations and expositions of Biblical texts to assist the reader in understanding and implementing Christian spiritual formation. Spiritual formation, spiritual development, and discipleship are all functional synonyms used to describe the attitudes, mindset and activities that should characterize those who claim to have had their lives change by and are now embracing the gospel.

Several definitions used in these books tell us this is also a vague or “fuzzy” concept in many minds. This idea of discipleship is one that is often better “caught than taught”. Hear these statements, not because they are in error, but with the often lack of clear substance.

“Following Jesus is a journey. Our destination is clear: conformity to the image of Christ. To be holy.”

“A disciple is someone who thinks God’s thoughts after Him and applies them to all of life.”

“A disciple is someone who self-consciously lives all of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”

It is “ the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

“It is a grace-enabled obedience to Jesus that impels us to live life in this world in the way God intended it to be lived.”

“Covenantal discipleship is learning to receive and respond to God’s grace and demand, which are mediated through Jesus the Servant King, so as to reflect God’s character in relation to Him, to others, and to the world, in order that all may come to experience this same grace and respond to this same demand.”

At its core discipleship is the abstract noun form that presents the meaning and function of being a disciple. The idea of a disciple is easier to define. It refers to a committed follower of someone, their teaching and/or life. You may be emulating the techniques of some sports figure, you might be observing a particular business practice or copying a certain design style. There are many ways one could be described as another's "disciple." In our context we then are considering the ideas and activities involved in being a disciple of God, in particular his Son, Jesus Christ.

So discipleship is the "how" one becomes and practices the idea of being a disciple or follower. It is innate in the Bible's view of Christianity, that God's kingdom is filled with disciples and only disciples. I cannot give a comprehensive presentation of all that the Bible teaches on this matter, there are many texts, historical examples and detailed expositions that provide a more full explanation. This morning we can however, introduce the concept and establish the framework that informs the expression of discipleship in the life and "ministry" of Clearcreek Chapel.

Today an overview of I Thessalonians will give us insight to Paul's understanding of discipleship for this era of redemptive history. We choose this text because it represents one of the earliest New Testament documents and gives us an awareness of some of the details of Paul's missionary and missional strategies and content.

The Thessalonian believers first met the apostle as he fled from persecution he faced in the Macedonian city of Philippi. Luke records these events in Acts chapters 16-18. He faced a similar persecution here in the city of Thessalonica as well. Even though his initial contact with the believers in these cities was chronologically short, his time of teaching and training was no doubt somewhat intense. In light of the time constraints placed upon his ministry in the contexts orchestrated by God's wisdom and plans, his close associates, in this case Silas and Timothy, were instrumental in furthering Paul's basic instructions.

After he arrived in the city of Corinth, Paul had the opportunity to interact with his companions and send at least two pieces of correspondence over the development and establishment of this band of believers. Some of the turmoil had likely settled down as Corinth was a much larger city and more cosmopolitan in its diversity. The Holy Spirit superintended the writing of these letters and we know them today as I and II Thessalonians. Next to Paul's letter to the churches in the region of Galatia these represent the first of Paul's letters and with the letter from James these are the earliest documents that form the New Testament. It is to the first of these letters we turn to this morning.

<Read I Thessalonians 1:1-10>

## Context (vs. 1)

The first thing we need to notice from this passage is the context that Paul establishes as he begins to encourage and instruct them.

## Church

As Paul begins he addresses them in language they would understand. He was not there long, but as we surmised, likely his instruction was intense. As he addresses them as “church” he uses a term he likely used before and one they would understand. The fact that he positions this term and uses it with very little (although important) qualifications lets us know they would have had a grasp of the idea behind “church”. For those in the first century the concept behind the word we translate into the English “church” was well known and used. It referred to a gathering of people for a specific task, often based on common work, trade, skill, hobby or religious actions. It would be known by a description perhaps named for the person leading or the kind of activity that occurred when they gathered. Paul in other correspondences uses this term to describe the gather of the people of God who are called together by the gospel for worship, instruction and care. Jesus had used a term that was translated by the same word in Matthew’s Gospel where identified this group as “His” and they would be empowered, enabled and function collectively. And yet Paul goes on...

## Of Thessalonians

Which is why there is this qualifier for the idea of church. It was composed of Thessalonians. He is addressing the particular collection of those people of this city who had embraced the gospel and were gathering together for worship, instruction and care. For Paul (and Jesus), church is identifiable and particular with eschatological and spiritual relationships and implications. It, like many things in this period of God’s Kingdom expansion is already, but not yet.

## In God

This is always a potent reminder that their existence was dependent upon God and the work of Christ. They were not gathered and called because of their own abilities, qualities or needs, they were identified and exist because they are “in” God and Christ.

So from the very beginning to this letter we have a context that sets the tone and perspective from which to read this. The instruction found in this piece of correspondence had as its first audience a church and should be applied today in similar context. We often “over-realize” our eschatology and ignore the particular application and then apply many ideas to Christianity in general and call it “the church.” Lets read on with the idea that what the apostle says to this identifiable, visible, measurable group of people from the first century is meaningful and applicable to this identifiable, visible and measurable group of people gathering in God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ of people resident in Springboro and the surrounding communities calling themselves Clearcreek Chapel.

## Actions (vss. 2,3)

Paul's letters almost always concur with the convention of the day in following the salutation with a thanksgiving/wish/prayer. In doing so, he reminds us of the role that prayer had in his work, and he introduces the themes and concerns that he will more fully elaborate on in the body of the letter. Here, in his prayers, he tells the Thessalonian believers he gives thanks to God for three specific concepts their lives exhibit. But note that he describes these three abstract concepts with concrete "action" ideas coupled with them. Their Christianity is a blend, merger, conglomerate of idea and action.

## Faith

The first of these is faith. Faith is to be heard and read as the commitment one has for Christ and His gospel. It is a solid, settled trust in God, His plans and His purposes sometimes in the face of adversity and confusion. This also is often in the context of conflict with previous lifestyles and common practices, with friends and relatives, with old ideas and opinions. And yet Paul is not merely thankful for their faith, but for their "work of faith." He recognizes and is encouraging them in the actions that occur because of their faith. The activities and events that display and exhibit the gospel to others, that encourage and confirm the gospel in their thinking, and fortify affirm the gospel in their living.

## Love

The second of these is love. And again, Paul does not merely thank God that they have an attitude of care and compassion for each other and those around them, but is thankful that it is seen in labor. They are engaged in the obvious, visible activity of loving as enabled by the love of Christ that has been made real in their lives as they embrace the gospel of love.

## Hope

And thirdly, as he completes what is often referred to as the Pauline triad (you can often find allusions to faith/hope/love in other of Paul's letters), he thanks them for their hope. They have a firm commitment and confidence in the ultimate future that renders the concerns and cares of this life as pittance when viewed with respect to the glory that is ahead. But again this hope is substantial. It is visible in their behavior that can be described as steadfast.

Paul then sees their lives through, not only concepts, but in action and activity. The actions are not separable from the concepts but yet are a real and tangible expression of these. Other Biblical authors affirm the same ideas (James in his near contemporaneous letter for one) that what one says they believe will be obvious in what they do. We too should be concerned that our lives are in alignment with our confession. A recent author had this to say from his book *Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America and Found Unexpected Peace*. "If the Lord is real, it would make sense for the people of God, on average, to be superior morally and ethically to the rest

of society. Statistically, they aren't...It's hard to believe in God when it's impossible to tell the difference between His people and atheists."

### Basis (vss 4,5a)

The next sentence describes the basis for this obvious expression of life-change.

### God's design

Paul first of all reminds them of their chosen status. The love that has been bestowed upon them is not because of their inherent goodness, intelligence or "faith." God's plan and purpose is the governing principle for all of life and by implication our expressions should seek to conform His design. If it is God's world, realm, and rule then it is assumed, even imperative, that we conform to His expressed purposes. We are not to follow our own whims and fancies.

### Gospel

And as we read further, these plans and purposes are expressed in the centrality of the gospel. The message of the gospel is the communication of God's design and plan and it is accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit to bring it to fruition and action. To leave the focus of the gospel in life is surely to fail. Often various versions of Christianity get off track when they think that the Gospel is merely the entry gate for Christian life and belief. The gospel is the key and core to all of God's work as it displays the His glory in the love the Father has for the Son and love the Son has for the Father to bring a multitude of worshippers in their present to exalt their worth and wisdom.

Clearcreek Chapel can ill-afford not to keep the gospel center in all of its preaching, teaching and action. We must be diligent to see God's design and align our work with His work and plan. We see this is the Word of the gospel and indeed in the whole of His revelation in the Scriptures.

### Discipleship (vss. 5b-10)

#### Imitators

From the end of verse five we are then introduced to the ideas of discipleship. Remember "discipleship" is the abstract noun form that presents the meaning and function of being a disciple. And a disciple is one who is a committed follower of someone, their teaching and/or life. Paul points out what kind of people he and his associates were during their time with them and praises them for their imitation of this life. He was happy they were disciples of him, because he was a disciple, an imitator of Christ, the Lord. This life of faith, love and hope lived in actions and deeds because of the gospel seen in the design of God and his plans and purposes is the imitation of Christ in the community of faith in God among them, the Thessalonians first demonstrated in the life of Paul for them and continued among them to be seen by others in their

community. We know Paul expected this imitation to continue among them from later instruction in chapter five. Turn over to 5:12-24.

<read I Thessalonians 5:12-24>

This imitation saw expression in respect, leadership, admonishment, encouragement, and the like.

#### Examples

And we see this was to be exemplary not only among themselves, but evident to others both unbelievers and believers as well. (read to end of chapter).

#### Reflect and Respond

So what does this tell us about discipleship and how do we seek to apply this in the life and ministry (ministries) of Clearcreek Chapel.

1. Discipleship is a community concept in the context of churches.  
We must seek the context of God's work in this era of redemptive history as grounded in the local gatherings of his people in covenant and leadership. It is not an independent, self-directed set of activities or contemplations. It does not lead to detached functions.
2. Discipleship is an active engagement. Work, labor and steadfastness should be expressions clearly connected to what we are thinking about our following Christ.
3. Discipleship involves growth and change both personally and collectively. The gospel will continue to expose our hearts in its hidden sins and idols and provide challenge and power for this change. Discipleship is not about a how-to approach to fixing our lives and yet the gospel moves in and fixes what we do not even know is broken.
4. Discipleship involves dependence on others and the Holy Spirit. The power of the Spirit is the power of the Gospel and yet God has designed the community of faith, the church with its people, teachers, leaders to serve as the vehicle for change. Avoiding this participation is avoiding God's design and plan.
5. Discipleship involves instruction from God's Word. It is the Word of the Lord that sounds forth when we align ourselves in this way.

Clearcreek Chapel, although perhaps imperfectly, seeks to engage the Word of God with the people of God. The ideal is for you to engage the Word in the program at the Chapel. Often church ministry is seen as an option along the

cafeteria line of spirituality. There are often good works being done and good lessons to be had “out there.” But God’s design is to be seen in the life, community and work of his people in gathered locales known as churches. Discipleship will flourish in this context.

Here is a brief summary as to how this looks at Clearcreek Chapel:

Flocks, intentioned gatherings for relationship building, prayer and intergenerational discussion are part of the Biblical design for personal growth and change.

Bible Education that consists of larger, thematic classes is designed to provide information and context to build upon. A more formal classroom approach allows for the consistent delivery of the Biblical message. Classes whose purpose is to introduce or refresh some of the basics of the Christian faith, to provide a lightly more in-depth look at the principles themes that are stressed throughout the Chapel life and focused studies on the Biblical text are included with this intention.

Classroom opportunities for youth and younger children provide a foundation, emphasizing the overall Biblical message and how the individual parts (books, people and events) highlight the focus of Christ and the Gospel.

There are smaller, group Bible studies form the core of exemplifying opportunities, designed for ladies and men these are included in this concept and continue to be developed and revised to best accomplish their goals.

Opportunities for individual discussion, teaching and counseling are often required to assist people as they learn to be followers of Jesus.

Providing opportunities for tangible expressions of love, care and concern, and to be more obvious in our witness to the power of the gospel allow settings to use giftedness, talents and time to serve one another in a host of varieties are intentioned as well.

Church program should not be merely organized because “that is what we do” but rather because it allows for expression and development of the Christ-likeness that should be our goals. Are you engaged in the life of the Chapel or are you trying to function as an independent. Free lance Christians were not a part of Paul’s understanding of life, even his letters to individuals assumed a church context, either its participation as in the case of Philemon or in leadership as with Timothy and Titus. Where are you?

