



EQUIPPER

The monthly e-zine from the U.S. Church Administration and Development (CAD) team of Grace Communion International.

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Dear minister of reconciliation in Christ,

The Easter season powerfully proclaims that God so loved the world that he sent his Son, and that love motivated Jesus to endure the cross. That same love is manifested in the sacrifices we make to share God's love with others. Through the reports I receive and in what I observe as I travel, it's clear our congregations are having a great impact! We're small in size, but we share in the expansive heart of the triune God who works in and through us for the sake of the world. This issue of *Equipper* emphasizes that this work is *fundamentally relational*, because God, who is a triune communion of love in his own being, expresses that being through his relational work of love.

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As we share in what the Father, Son and Spirit are doing in the world, we participate in God's ministry of reconciliation—helping people experience, in union with Jesus, by the Spirit, the healing of relationships with God and with people. Walking with Jesus in this relational ministry leads us to reach out to others to share God's love with them. As we do, the Spirit leads us to invite these people into our communities of reconciliation (local churches) where they are relationally discipled as followers of Jesus who then reach out to and disciple others (see the article about relational discipling on page two).



He Wept Over It
Enrique Simonet (1892)
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It brings me great joy to see our churches grow in active participation in the discipling mission of God. This growth occurs as leaders and other members catch the vision of what Jesus is doing. The results are amazing!

God has indeed blessed us with faithful members; a wonderful, incarnational Trinitarian theology; and quality training coupled with supportive coaching. Now our challenge is to apply these God-given resources in Gospel-shaped, missional ways. I see this occurring as God leads us into a deeper trust in Jesus and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is making it even clearer to us that we are called to active participation in the reconciling ministry of Jesus (read 2 Corinthians chapter five and be challenged and inspired). The Spirit is knitting our hearts together as we more deeply embrace the truth that we are part of God's family, the Body of Christ, the church. Together we must unify our resources and efforts in such a way that we are faithful stewards of the grace that we have received. Thank you for being one of those faithful stewards!

May you and yours have a joy-filled Easter season,

Greg Williams, director, GCI-USA Church Administration and Development

Equipping all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

Why are relationships and love so important to discipleship?

(Excerpted on Sonlife's Live 2:6 blog from *Discipleship is the Core Mission of the Church: Helping People Trust and Follow Jesus*, by Bobby Harrington)

I am a relational person. Ask me what matters in this life and I will quickly tell you that, next to God, the most important thing to me is my family and friends. The thought of life without these relationships would be very disturbing to me. But the thought of life with these relationships is pure joy—especially when I am looking forward to everyone joining together at my house for something like Thanksgiving.

I am sure glad that God is relational. God was, and continues to be, in relationship with the Son and the Spirit. God is love. God's commands are grounded and summarized relationally—loving God and loving people.

Not only is God relational, but Jesus' ministry was relational. Jesus shows us the best method of discipleship possible and it was a method based in relationships. We can describe Jesus' approach by identifying four basic types of discipling relationships that Jesus modeled for us. Wise ministry looks carefully at the method of discipleship that Jesus used and seeks, where possible and applicable, to replicate it today.

1. *Intimate relationship level*—Jesus and 3 people—Peter, James, and John. These were the closest and most intense of all Jesus' discipling relationships. Jesus disciplined these men to be the primary leaders of his church.
2. *Personal relationship level*—Jesus and 12 people, the disciples. These were close discipling relationships. These men regularly met in relational environments—sometimes Jesus taught them, sometimes he modeled godly behavior for them, sometimes he coached them with questions, etc.
3. *Social relationship level*—Jesus and the 72. Jesus was in regular social relationships with people like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These were people that Jesus disciplined, but not as personally or intimately as he did the others.
4. *Public relationship level*—Jesus and the crowds. There were times when Jesus taught the crowds, showing them how to trust and follow him, but the relationships were public, general.

Relationships are the environment by which discipleship functioned in the rest of the New Testament. Elders were people shepherding other people in relationship. Evangelists were people sent to reach people and invite them into relationship. Parents were people discipling children in relationship. The apostles teach us that discipleship is by relationship and it is actually spiritual parenting (1 Thess. 2:6-8, 11-12; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4).

Jesus and the New Testament demonstrate that discipleship needs both *direction* and *relationship*.

Direction without relationship is a program-driven approach to discipleship that says, "Read this book. Take this class. Memorize these verses. Listen to these sermons. Memorize these answers. Follow these steps." I call this "educational discipleship." Both the Bible and research show that this kind of "head oriented approach" is ineffective. Christ-centered, New Testament guided instruction is practical and for all of life, including, but greatly transcending knowledge and facts.

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Conversely, relationship without direction results in a process lacking in the other direction. It says, “Let’s just hang out together. Let’s meet over coffee to talk. Let’s enjoy one another.” Relationships by themselves are not discipleship. Discipleship involves imitation, but that is more than just relationship (1 Cor. 4:16). Being with people, enjoying life, sharing pain and the like are all essential to discipleship (see Romans 12), but it is more than just relationship.

Both guidance and relationship are essential. Biblical guidance and coaching, as defined by Jesus, and modeled by the apostles, is an intentional process, grounded in relationship. His method of discipleship was grounded in the environment of *agape* love—a love that acts according to what is best for the other person.

Jesus loved people this way and commands us to show the same love for one another: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Note that the chief hallmark of discipleship is *agape* love. It is the most important trait by which a true disciple is known. Later in the Bible, the apostle John describes something similar when he writes: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16).

Clarity on this point is important because there are other things in the Bible that are good things that might appear to be equally important. Yet, *agape* love is the most important sign of authentic discipleship. Authentic discipleship is not a worship Experience. It is not experiences of the Holy Spirit. It is not correct doctrine. It is not faith. It is not service to the poor and needy. *Agape* love is the environment and foundation that God wants for the church—it is the first and most important aspect of the Holy Spirit’s fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:22).

The apostle Paul describes the priority of love in Galatians 6:10, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” This passage helps us understand why the Bible emphasizes our love to those who are within the church. There is no more heart-piercing passage in this regard than Matthew 25:31-46 where Jesus tells us that the final judgment will reveal how well our faith has led us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ—the ones Jesus refers to as “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.” This passage describes how true disciples will love and take care of each other and that doing so should be an important priority for us. That’s why love must be the foundation for everything that happens in the church. Indeed, we are to pursue a life of love (Ephesians 5:1-2).

- Love is our mindset, before relationships and it upholds them.
- Love is our mindset, before teaching and it leads us through them.
- Love is our mindset, before tasks and it undergirds them.
- Love is our mindset, before instruction and it guides it through and through.
- Love is our mindset, before leading or following and it directs us.

It is only when love is the priority that a church will be distinctive in the way God intends. As someone has said: *In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love. Love is the distinguishing trait of true Christianity.*