

LEARNING

Creating Tension That Seeks Resolution

If a disciple is fundamentally a student or learner, then a discipler is fundamentally a teacher. Teaching and learning. That is the raw essence of discipleship. I don't know about you, but I find this kind of simplicity refreshing.

In Jesus' day there were all sorts of people who gathered to hear him teach. The ones who liked what they heard and followed him around were called his disciples. One time he miraculously fed a bunch of them. So they kept following, but it turns out they were interested for the wrong reasons, like filling their bellies, so they became disinterested when Jesus told them they had to eat his flesh. They stopped being his disciples and went home.

Then there were the twelve disciples who Jesus chose and to whom he gave special attention. The eating flesh thing was weird to them too, but they were committed to following Jesus no matter what. Peter said, "*Where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" Their learning led them to belief and trust in the person of Jesus because that was what he relentlessly taught and offered them.

This is what our aim must be as well. We must teach people to believe and trust in Jesus in their actual life and not just in their what-I-believe-because-I-am-a-Christian-life. This chapter is about how to do that.

A Case for Cussing and Threats of Physical Violence

I read a great book a few years ago about the Sermon on the Mount and I wanted to teach it to some guys. So I asked a student I knew, Ben, if he could round up some fellas for a Bible study. He got six guys: four fraternity presidents and two chaplains. They had all grown up going to church and had probably heard sermons on this passage before.

They were confident in their command of all the usual Bible study questions. I wished I knew of some other kind of questions. The first week was introductory and pleasant. At the end I gave them homework: to study the first twenty verses and be ready to tell everyone what they thought Jesus was saying. Then, sensing that they had no reason to do this assignment, I warned them that they better come knowing their stuff because I was going to argue with whatever they said.

They all came back. I had no idea how this would go, but around the circle we went. Most of them disagreed with each other, but when they didn't I would ask all sorts of antagonizing questions. After thirty minutes they were so confused about what Jesus was saying, and what they were saying, that they asked me what I thought. My initial thought was that this was the first time a student had actually asked me to tell them what I thought about a passage. I said, "*I could give you my opinion, but I'm curious why you think Jesus meant that*". Then Ben blurted out – like we were on Jerry Springer and not at Bible Study – "*okay, tell me what you think this passage means and then I am going to kick your ass*". That was the turning point, because until then I had been trying to teach people a bunch of stuff that they only mildly wanted to learn. Now Ben was acting like I hid his car keys

and wouldn't tell him where. Think about this for a second: A student was actually cussing at me because I wouldn't tell him what I thought about a passage in the Bible.

I knew I couldn't take him, so I gave them my interpretation. They were not as impressed as I thought they would be. They argued with me because they thought it would be cool to see Ben beat up the Bible study leader (nothing against me personally), and at a deeper level because they had a genuine hunger to learn the Bible. It never felt so good not to have all the answers. Nobody left with that warm feeling you get when the lesson ties together neatly in the end with clean application points. We didn't even pray.

Dumping on People Stinks

I know more about the Bible than most of the students that I disciple. When I don't, I can prepare all week for their one-hour appointment and look very much like I know more than they do. I could have showed up that day at Bible study and simply dumped everything I had learned about those twenty verses on them, annotated charts and the whole deal. They may have thought I was smart and that I was worth following, I mean, that Jesus is worth following. It could have been neat and tidy with prayer requests and one thing they could do that week to apply it to their life. I didn't do that because I was tired of pretending that it works.

I figured they would be better off studying for hours only to come up with the "wrong answers." If that makes you uneasy, then you care too much about making sure people have all the correct information about their spiritual life. Just stop for a moment and think about how process oriented Jesus was with his disciples. He was more concerned with whether or not they loved him than he was with whether or not they had the right answers. I believe that we generally want what is best for our disciples. It's just that some of our methods do not accomplish what we want.

Take, for example, this group of frat guys. My goal for them was that they would interact with Jesus more relationally. A good beginning, I thought, would be for them to think of him as a person. Well that's easy, right? Just tell them that he was God in the flesh, tempted in every way that we are tempted, and that he wept. But I was not trying to prove a point. I was trying to help them experience a person. So instead of explaining to them what Jesus was saying, I made them wrestle with it. It's the difference between me telling a guy all about a girl he likes and letting him discover her through relational pursuit. He would certainly be wrong and make mistakes along the way, but his attraction to her would lead him to greater intimacy than knowledge of her ever would. Come to think of it, having a lot of knowledge about someone you don't know is called stalking.

Just because we tell our disciples something, or many things, does not mean that they will understand or remember it – or that it will influence their actual life.

Now before you throw away all of your materials, you should know that I went home that day and wrote a four page e-mail to the group in which I clearly laid out my thoughts about the passage. I probably did it because the unresolved discussion made me nervous. This was all new to me and I wanted to feel like I made sure they knew the right answers. Old habits are hard to break (I'm referring to the one of needing to look smart). In hindsight, I am glad I sent the e-mail. It brought some clarity to the issues of our discussion. So maybe telling people stuff isn't all that bad, but it's always better if they actually want to hear it.

Frustrated People Learn Stuff

I wish you could have been there for our third meeting. They came in like first year law students, with their scribbled notes and coffee eyes, ready to make their case. We argued less that day, though I didn't escape without being called names that I cannot repeat here. I don't know of another scenario where I would boast about such a thing, but this was different. It was frat-tastic.

I have tried all kinds of tricks to get guys to read their Bible: food, cash, guilt, quizzes, you name it. I've never had much success because I'm always giving out all the answers. What I learned with the frat guys is that people are more likely to learn when they have to figure stuff out for themselves. It's kind of like when you have a tune in your head and can't stop thinking about it until you remember the song title. Because we never totally resolved everything in our meetings, our discussions would turn in their heads all week. It's annoying to feel like you don't know stuff. So they would study, not because it was their assignment, but because they actually wanted to learn.

The other thing we never did was prescribe application points. I'm not against it. It just never seemed to fit. I guess it's hard to apply something you don't really understand. But here is what happened. After our fourth meeting, a few of the guys hung around after I left and decided they wanted to get together at 7:00 the next morning. I don't remember when or where I found out about this, but the almost exact words of the guy who told me were these: *"we decided to meet every week the morning after our Bible study just to pray about what we are learning and talk about how we can help each other apply it to our lives."* I probably said something that would indicate both that I was pleased and that such a response to my legendary Bible studies was normal.

I was blown away. I could have done ten lessons on accountability and community and fellowship and those guys may not have started meeting together like that. It wasn't about being smart at Bible study anymore. What they were doing was genuine and desperate. It was all they could think to do if they were going to really learn how to relate to Jesus. Learning is easy. Wanting to learn is not.

You would never tell a non-Christian that all he needs to do to follow Jesus is be faithful to certain activities like Bible study and accountability and prayer. So why would you prescribe that for a Christian? These things are not indicators of transformation. They are only means of transformation. When we confuse the issue by making an end out of means, what results is the burden of doing stuff for someone we don't like.

I was in four honors classes in the ninth grade. Three of them were not hard, and I don't think English would have been either if Satan's girlfriend wasn't my teacher. Realistically she was too old to be Satan's girlfriend, but nobody liked her. I remember the first open house about the second week of school. My classmates and I had gone home and told our parents how evil she was for making things so hard on us. And since parents love their children, they all came ready to give this teacher a piece of their mind. She was a no-show. That made sense to me. Even Jesus slipped away when people started picking up stones. We found out later that she had been attending a ceremony where she was accepting a teacher of the year award. This caused our parents to turn on us. She was not going to get fired. Even worse, I began to feel that she loved me and wanted to help me become a better person. I worked so hard in that class that I fell in love with English. I even majored in it for a while in college. No teacher has ever frustrated me as much as her, but in the end I loved her for what she did for us.

One day late in the semester she sat down at the desk next to me and announced that we were going to skip class and play football outside instead. I let out a shout of joy and flung my arms up in the air. On the way up, my left elbow caught her right below the eye. I felt bad but also considered it a sort of consolation prize for how hard she'd made us work.

On some level I think the frat guys wanted me to make it easier on them, but in the end I think they loved me for helping them relate to Jesus instead of dumping my Jesus information on them. And better than loving me, they fell in love with Jesus.

One way to stop talking is to ask questions

What I learned in the fratmosphere – that tension seeks resolution – is the governing principle in how I disciple people these days. I look for ways to make people uneasy about what they know. I do this by asking questions, and instead of answering them when the silence gets awkward I just keep asking more. I'm not comfortable with silence, but filling it with words about what I believe does not help me understand what my disciples believe. And what they believe is the central issue to their discipleship. Jesus was really good at this. He answered questions with questions. He made people think about what they were saying and why they were saying it. He did it all the time.

One time these two guys, Michael and Casey, asked me to disciple them. I did not know them very well, so I planned nothing for our first meeting. For about fifteen minutes it was awkward like a first date. They were expecting something from me, some secret key to the door of their spiritual success, or at least some kind of plan for that meeting. I had nothing. I was asking them silly questions like “*how was your summer?*” and “*what's God been teaching you?*” Then one of the guys set off an alarm. He said something about God showing him something that he knew intellectually but did not experience. I don't even remember what the particular thing was. I just knew that he had hit on some universal and gigantic problem. Maybe my questions weren't so lame after all. Or maybe it just shows that even lame questions are better than no questions.

Most of the discipleship materials and discussions I have used in the past are very clean and linear. For example, they usually have a subject (Holy Spirit) which may be introduced by some diagnostic questions (which circle represents your life?) to surface the problem (carnal life), followed by some teaching points that explain the subject matter, and then a point of application (pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit). This is painfully general, I know, but this is typically how it goes. The disciple learns something (maybe), but there is no tension, no frustration, no feeling stupid. It's simply too packaged and pleasant to affect his actual life.

People Are Governed by What They Want

I knew that I didn't want to dump on him. Here is where the creating tension thing kicked in.

I sat up in my chair and listened:

“Yeah, we all know too much. I had a group of pledges one year that grew up in a really good church, but what they knew and what they experienced were two different worlds. I told them at our first meeting that I thought they were all full of crap. Let me ask you what I asked them.”

“Okay” (does that mean he thinks we are full of crap, too?)

“If Jesus were here physically and were your discipler this semester instead of me, do you think you would have a better shot at growing spiritually than you do now with me as your discipler and his Spirit living inside you?”

Casey smirked and asked, “What do you mean ‘here physically’?”

“I mean here, physically. He could be right by your side as much as you wanted him to be.”

“Well, then I’d take that.”

“Why?”

“Because he would be straight with me, you know. He could see into my heart and just tell it like it is. There wouldn’t be any question about what I’m supposed to do.”

“So this seems like a no-brainer to you?”

“I guess” (confident but suspicious)

I turned to Michael, “What about you?”

“Well, I know the right answer is the Holy Spirit but since that is what I have had all along, and that hasn’t worked out so well, I would honestly say Jesus just to try something new.”

This is one thing I love about small group dynamics. They chose the same thing but for different reasons. Michael knew the “right answer”. Casey was left wondering why his answer was “wrong” and wishing he hadn’t been so sure of himself. Someone was going to look stupid, and nothing creates tension like the potential of looking stupid.

I could have asked them to describe their Christian experience. They would have said something along the lines of average, slow-going, up and down. Then I could have told them that the Holy Spirit was the key to experiencing Christ, and taught them all about who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. That would have addressed the issue, but not their heart. It would have just put them under the pile by teaching them more stuff that they should experience but don’t.

I am not impressed anymore by what people know. I want to know what they want. In this case they wanted Jesus as their discipler instead of me, but at the expense of having his Spirit inside them. This scenario has its apparent advantages, but it reveals something about them at the level of their desires. I already knew at this point what it says about them, but again, what I know will very rarely change anyone. They have to discover it. So we continued:

I asked both of them, “If you would be better off having Jesus with you instead of in you, why didn’t God set it up that way?”

(Blank stares)

“I mean, the disciples wanted Jesus to stay and he told them at least twice that it was better for them if he left.”

Casey, probably sensing that he was going to be the one to look stupid, questioned, *“When did He say that?”*

I showed him the verses. It’s hard to argue with verses if you believe the Bible. *“So why is it better?”* (i.e. Why were you wrong?).

(Blank stares again)

Let’s review. I could have explained all this to them on the front end and avoided hurting anyone’s self-esteem. They would know by now why and how the Holy Spirit is better, but unfortunately they would only have use for that type of knowledge on a multiple choice test. Instead, I asked two simple questions and surfaced that deep down they really just want Christianity to be easier:

“Okay, Casey, you said you would like it because Jesus would shoot straight with you. He could look in your heart and tell you that you are full of crap. Then what would you do about it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s think about it this way. If LeBron James was your personal coach in basketball, could you at some point play in the NBA?”

“No.”

“Why not? You would have one of the best players in the world teaching you.”

“But that doesn’t mean I could play like him.”

“Okay. What if somehow LeBron could live inside you and play through you? Then could you play in the NBA?”

(epiphany) *“Oh I get it ... if I didn’t have his Spirit in me I wouldn’t be able to do what he tells me I need to do. It wouldn’t matter that Jesus was here telling me to do it.”*

Casey was getting somewhere now. I turned to Michael again. *“Okay dude, you knew that already. So why isn’t that what you want?”*

“I don’t know.”

“Well you said it wasn’t working. How come?”

This is a weird spot to be in. If he doesn’t identify himself as the problem, then he is saying that God’s way of doing things doesn’t work. He doesn’t want to believe either one. This tension between what we know to be the

right answer and what we really believe gets right to the heart of Casey's initial statement, the thing that started all this.

They had to go to class, so I walked across campus with them. I clarified the conversation a little bit:

"Okay. We're saying that God has given us everything we need to walk with Him. Everything you need to be courageous, kind, humble, unselfish, etc. is in you. So why isn't our life characterized by those things?"

Michael spoke up, *"Well, to use your analogy. I think it's because we don't let God play through us."*

"So what keeps us from letting God play in our lives?"

"For me, like even if LeBron lived in me, and even though I am not as good, I might not let him play because I want to be the one playing. It's like I'd rather play badly than let someone else play for me."

I don't think Michael knew how deep and insightful that statement was. Casey wasn't saying much at this point. He was either thinking or looking at girls. They identified a few more obstacles to letting God play in our lives, things like busyness and laziness. We were sort of running out of things to talk about and had a good ways to walk still. I was trying to figure out in my head where this conversation should go. I wanted to work toward some causes or answers, something to give us hope that we are not stuck in this knowing-but-not-experiencing life. The question that came to mind did not seem like a good one, but if I didn't ask something quick I was going to end up preaching to them.

So I asked them what they wanted today, just something they have thought about and really wanted out of today. Casey said that he really wanted to skip this appointment and go back to sleep. Michael had nothing. I said, *"Do you typically just think about getting through the day with as much happiness and as little pain as possible?"* They gave a nod of concession. I asked them, *"Is it safe to say that if you didn't want much of anything today that you also didn't want God to play in your life?"* They didn't like being set up like that.

I was not thinking that they were bad Christians. I thought they loved God and wanted to walk with him, and I told them that. I explained that I thought a major dilemma in Christian life is that we often have general desires that do not find their way into our day-to-day life. We might answer on a test that we want to live fruitful lives, but like in this case, we may not actually want it in a way that would make us view today as a means toward that end. Ultimately our lives amount to the sum of our individual days. Since our individual days consist of us mainly doing what we want to do, our lives ultimately have a lot to do with what we want today. That is why I asked that. Then I said, *"It seems to me that letting God play in our lives has a lot to do with simply wanting him to."*

They liked that because it sounded simple. Then Casey asked, *"How do I make myself want something?"* He had finally discovered the nerve center of everything we were talking about. The answer to that question holds the key to the universal and gigantic problem.

People Know They Have Problems But They Don't Believe It

Michael and Casey did not come to our meeting that day thinking that they had a problem and needed my help to fix it. They came to our meeting thinking that they are supposed to be disciples, and that discipleship means meeting with someone once a week. I could have told them on the front end that they had a problem and that the solution had something to do with what they want. But they wouldn't have cared. Just like non-Christians don't care when we tell them about their problem and God's solution. They only care if they believe it.

That is why our discipleship efforts must be aimed not at what people know, but at what they believe. And the best way to find out what your disciples believe is to ask questions that surface what they want. What they want surfaces the heart-idols in their life. Only once they discover these can they ask the question, "*How do I make myself want something else?*" That question is at the heart of the gospel: "*How do I turn from my independence and follow Jesus?*"

And this is what every disciple needs to be asking themselves with respect to all the issues they deal with in their actual life. But don't go out and just start asking your disciples how they can turn from their lame desires and want to follow Jesus. They need to discover this question at the end of their rope. They need to ask it with a sense of helplessness in their gut.

That is the way Casey asked it, like he wouldn't be able to keep being a Christian if he didn't figure out how to make himself want. Fortunately for me our time was up: "*Good question Casey ... why don't you guys think about how to do that and we'll pick it up next week.*"