

Discipleship through Co-Laboring

By Eric Williams

The Discipleship Dilemma

Pastors and other church leaders are charged with the task of shepherding the flock of God. This involves leading, feeding, protecting, nurturing, and other such things. Jesus (the Chief Shepherd) showed us that *discipleship* plays a vital role in fulfilling these duties. He devoted most of His time and effort to working with a few chosen men whom He was preparing to assume leadership roles within the body. This is an example that we, today, should follow.

Discipleship, however, is a topic that intimidates many church leaders. We know that Jesus did it – and we know that we are supposed to be doing it – but we have many questions about how the job is done. *When can I find the time in my busy schedule? Would I be neglecting the body or showing favoritism toward “a chosen few.” How do I go about picking the right people? When recruiting them, what should I reveal about my plans so I can arouse their interest but not scare them off? When we get together, what should we talk about and what should we do?* These are only some of the questions that must be answered before many church leaders will feel comfortable enough to become involved in discipleship.

This booklet will present answers to these questions – answers that are drawn from the example of Jesus. It does not, however, examine the topic of discipleship as thoroughly as many other books on the subject. Its purpose is two-fold. First, it presents the easiest way for a church leader to get started – to take the first step toward establishing a discipleship relationship with one or more church members. Second, it looks at how an emphasis on discipleship is vital to the overall health of the local church.

The Example of Jesus

Our brief study begins with the calling of Peter (and his brother Andrew) in Mark 1:17. *“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”* His first statement (“Come, follow me”) was a call to be a disciple. They accepted His call when they “left their nets and followed him” (verse 18). The second statement (“and I will make you...”) was a promise to equip them with some valuable skills. They had both seen Jesus minister to the masses and lead people to repentance and faith. Jesus was promising to train them in how to do those very things. For Peter, the opportunity to learn how to do what Jesus was doing was too good of an offer to pass up. He could devote his time to something much more important, rewarding, and personally fulfilling than catching fish. Peter did not, at the time, understand the full ramifications of becoming a fisher of men, but he knew enough to accept the offer.

The training that Jesus provided was not the classroom instruction that is common today. The method that Jesus used to equip them is revealed in Luke 8:1. “After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. *The Twelve were with him*” (emphasis added). Jesus simply did the work that He knew needed to be done – and He invited the disciples to join Him, watch Him, and assist Him in that work. Their involvement in the work (as apprentices) provided them with the best possible kind of training.

During their time together, Peter and the other disciples did more than just observe their Master’s example. They asked Him questions (Luke 8:9 and Matt. 13:10) and they listened to His explanations. They responded to the questions that He asked (Luke 8:25, 9:18-20, 9:24) as those questions stimulated their curiosity and peeked their interest. They learned a great deal about ministry – including actions (what to do), procedures (how to do it), and purposes (why it is done or why it is done a particular way). They also learned how to react and respond to a variety of occurrences. Before long, they were ready to do some work themselves. In Luke 9:1-6 (and again in Luke 10:1-12), Jesus gave them assignments –

sending them out to do ministry on their own (or in teams of two). Everything Jesus asked them to do was something they had already observed Him do. He also gave them precise instructions – the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* for both actions and reactions (see Luke 9:3-5).

After completing their assignments they reported back to Jesus (Luke 10:8) and they discussed their experiences. When they failed at an assignment, Jesus explained what they did wrong (Luke 9:40 and Mark 9:28-29) and what they would need to do in the future to be successful. When they made mistakes – and they made a lot of them (Luke 9:46-55), Jesus corrected them. Jesus used their questions, comments, assignments, activities, and mistakes as teaching opportunities. It did not take long for these regular people to become skilled and productive workers.

Jesus succeeded in raising up a team of faithful workers and committed leaders, but He did something else that was even more important. He trained them how to live for God. He understood that a truly fruitful worker must “abide in the vine” (John 15:4-5), so his training was not limited to just the ministry skills. He also dealt with their spiritual lives. Co-laboring together in ministry provided many opportunities to delve into these deeper matters. He spoke of (and modeled) many things that are vital to both ministry success and personal holiness. This included prayer (Luke 9:18, 28, 10:2, and 11:1), dependence upon God (Luke 9:10-17), humility (Luke 9:46), priorities (Luke 10:37-41), and submission (Luke 9:23).

By the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus had transformed eleven of His disciples into strong Apostles who were ready to lead the early church. He knew that quality leadership was and is vital to the church’s ongoing success. In fact, it was Israel’s shortage of quality spiritual leadership (John 10:1-21 and Matthew 23) that led to its sad spiritual state. This deficiency had plagued Israel throughout its history (Ezekiel 34) and is still a problem in many churches today. The urgent need for discipleship – the Christ-endorsed method of growing leaders – cannot be overemphasized.

To summarize, the method that Jesus used to grow these leaders was *Discipleship* through *Co-laboring* for the expressed purpose of *Equipping*. His long-term goal was to **Disciple** – to transform them into godly men and effective leaders. His recruiting promise was to **Equip** – to train them with the skills needed to do important work. His method of equipping was to **Co-labor** with them, side by side in ministry. To Jesus, discipleship and equipping were inseparable. One would not be done without the other. This is a blueprint worth imitating!

Co-laboring is the Answer

The example of Jesus shows us that the best way to begin a discipleship relationship with a church member is to co-labor together in a ministry. The disciple (or “trainee”) will learn how to function in that particular ministry by observing, imitating, and doing – and then by openly discussing their experiences. But beyond that, co-laboring also establishes a relationship that can flow into other areas of the disciple’s life beyond the ministry activities.

Today’s churches are filled with potential Peters – people who see others do things that are truly important and who want to learn to do those things themselves. Though few will make the full-time commitment that Peter made, many are willing to do it part-time – to devote one evening a week to a ministry apprenticeship. They *will* accept an invitation to “learn by doing” from someone they know and respect. But the question is this – how many church leaders are willing to make such an offer? Are you willing?

A Personal Challenge

Here is a challenge that is set before you. First, make a list of your ministry activities. Do you do visitation and share the Gospel? Do you serve those in need? Do you teach? Do you prepare sermons? Do you administer a program? Do you organize events? Next, pray (as Jesus did in Luke 6:12-13) about whom you can invite to join you in one of those ministries as a partner and trainee. Then, recruit one or

more trainees by promising to equip them in the workings of that ministry. Explain the commitment you are asking your trainees to make as well as the commitment that you will be making to them.

As you co-labor together each week, instruct, model, assign, evaluate, correct, and encourage – just as Jesus did with Peter and the other disciples. Share your long-term vision. Explain your thought-process as you evaluate alternatives and make decisions. Give assignments that start small and grow over time. Show patience as your trainees stumble and make mistakes. Help them learn the workings of the ministry and discover if this is an area where they are gifted and called.

Get to know your trainees. Assess their hearts, their walks with God, their gift areas, and their level of commitment to God and to His service. Find those who are faithful in little and entrust them with more. Grow a group of servants whom you know and trust, and then allow them to minister in the areas in which God leads them. Continue to meet with them and coach them as they take on new responsibilities on their own. Challenge them to recruit their own disciples and pass on to the next generation of workers the same things that you passed on to them. This is how Jesus built the church. This is what Paul did to train Timothy (Phil. 2:22). This is what you can do to build up your local church.

What you are really providing your trainees with is an opportunity to be “faithful in little.” God promises that those who are faithful in little will be entrusted with more (Matt. 25:21). When you turn your ministry into a launching pad for other workers, you will be starting them out on a journey that could lead to great things. Who knows what God has planned for them to do? The fruit could be abundant.

Lay Discipleship

Discipleship should start with the pastor, but it does not have to end there. Paul made it clear in 2 Timothy 2:2 that those who are both trained and faithful (even lay-workers) can pass what they know on to others. Many members of your church may be willing to co-labor with (and train) other people if they are challenged to do it – and if they are shown how. Picture your church’s third grade Sunday school teacher offering teaching apprenticeships to high school seniors. This is but one example of how co-laboring can be used within your church.

Some laypeople may choose to limit their discipleship efforts to equipping for service (and not venture into the deeper and more personal aspects of discipleship), but their efforts can still play an important role in getting others started in ministry. Jesus commanded us to “Ask [pray] the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2 and Matt. 9:38). The willingness of regular church members to disciple through co-laboring can be an answer to that prayer.

How the Church Benefits

Not everyone is called to lead, but all believers are called to work. For a church to be healthy, all members need to discover their gifts, hear their calling, develop their skills, and then become involved in ministry. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the leaders of the church are charged with the task of “preparing God’s people for works of service.” But verse 12 does not end there. It goes on to point out that “preparing God’s people for works of service” produces a much needed result – “so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Paul placed before us a clear cause-effect relationship. Prepare the flock for service and the church thrives. Allow the members to remain mere spectators and the church declines. The next four verses (vv. 13-16) describe a built-up body as one that is unified, mature, discerning, loving, growing, and active. These are traits that all church leaders desire but, in many cases, rarely see. In fact, some of the most common problems found in today’s churches are the mirror opposites of these traits. Many churches are plagued by divisions, immaturity, error, self-centeredness, stagnation, and inactivity. Yet equipping members for service is an important part of the cure to these common ailments.

How important is lay-service to the health of the local church? In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul likened the church to a body that has many parts, such as hands, ears, eyes, and feet (vv 12-26). In the same chapter (vv. 4-11), he pointed out that every member of the church has been given at least one

spiritual gift. These gifts are to be used to serve the body. Yet today, many churches are crippled. Too many of their members are dormant – completely uninvolved in ministry. The jobs that they are best suited to do are either not being done, done by the less skilled, or done by overburdened workers who spread themselves thin and (often) neglect their families.

Neither of these two passages mentions the best method for preparing people to serve, but we have clearly seen from Christ's example that it is *discipleship through co-laboring*. It can be the answer to getting a church active, growing, and mature.

Getting Started

So what should you do? Begin with yourself. All it takes is one person (pastor, leader, or layperson) to introduce *discipleship through co-laboring* into a church. Accept the challenge presented above. Invite a church member to join you in a ministry in which you are already involved and train that person in the workings of that ministry. Instruct, model, assign, evaluate, correct, and encourage. As you are able, help that person mature in other areas. Allow God to work in your trainee's heart as you encourage that person to explore other areas where he or she can serve.

These activities will not compete or interfere with what is already going on in your church. They can exist almost unnoticed by the majority of the body, but the fruits of this Christ-endorsed approach to ministry will soon be evident. Your example and your gentle prodding will encourage other church leaders (and laypeople) to become involved in discipleship through co-laboring. It is my prayer that God will use this in both your life and in the life of your church.

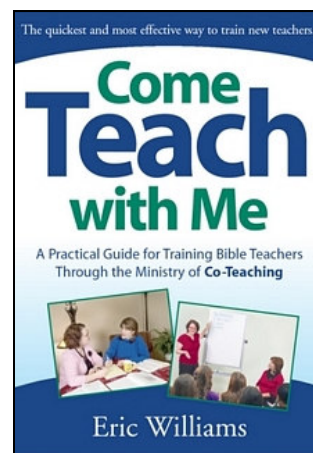
Suggested Ministries

Here are some examples of ministries wherein you and your trainee(s) can co-labor. Evangelists can take someone with them as they go out to share the gospel. Those with visitation ministries can do the same, taking others with them into hospitals, prisons, or homes and encouraging these ministry partners to participate in the dialog. Worship Leaders can meet weekly with someone to co-plan the worship service (selecting the music, etc...) as the two study the purpose of worship and pray together about how the services can be more Christ-centered. Deacons and other servants can take people along to do acts of service that minister to those in need. Sunday School teachers can recruit teaching assistants. A preacher can even recruit a skilled teacher to meet with weekly as a "brainstorm-buddy" during a sermon-planning session. They can study the passage together, discuss objectives, introductions, illustrations, etc... as they work together to construct powerful sermons. Co-laboring can be applied to greeting people and handing out bulletins, to making coffee before church (or cleaning it up afterwards), to nursery workers, and to virtually any type of work that is going on within the body. Teenagers (and even children) can be recruited to assist in many of these activities. This is only a short list of the many ministries where you, your fellow church leaders, and faithful lay-workers can recruit ministry partners and disciple them in the works of the ministry.

The Ministry of Co-Teaching

Of all the ministries where two can labor together, one in particular has great discipleship potential because it will have you and your trainee spending time every week studying the scriptures together. This is the ministry of co-teaching a Sunday school class or Bible study.

I have personally been involved in the ministry of co-teaching for many years. My trainee and I begin meeting together about a month before the teaching term begins. Each week throughout the term we meet on a weekday evening to plan the lessons together. Those meetings consist of evaluating the previous lesson, studying the scripture passage that we are preparing to teach, and then planning a lesson that is *Bible-Based, Purpose-*



Driven, and Learner-Friendly. We divide up the portions of the lesson and then spend the remaining time fleshing out the trainee's portion. On Sunday, when I teach my portion, I am role-modeling. When my trainee is teaching, I am evaluating and planning the feedback I will offer at the next meeting.

Over the years, I have co-taught with dozens of people. These trainees get the opportunity to learn by doing and to gain experience in a ministry that they may have lacked the skills to do on their own. They each received a chance to "grow into the job." Some of them have gone on to become great teachers and others have discovered that teaching was not their gift or calling. However, every one of them has benefited from the experience.

The procedures that I use are documented in a book entitled "Come Teach with Me." If you are interested in knowing more about this ministry, then visit www.cometeachwithme.com.

Other Reasons to Co-Teach

There are other reasons (besides discipleship) to recruit someone to join you as a co-teaching partner.

- **Teacher Training**
You can recruit a co-teaching partner as a "Trainee" and then systematically impart the teaching skills. The skills include how to study Scripture, how to build and deliver lessons that are Bible-based, purpose-driven, doctrinally sound and balanced, focused on God, life-applicable, and learner-friendly. Trainees learn best when they *learn by doing*.
- **Encouraging Lay-Participation**
In many churches, 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. Recruiting the less active ones as teaching assistants can get them involved in ministry. This can help launch them toward a lifetime of fruitful service.
- **Strengthening Youth**
Many teenagers are still deciding if church (or even God) is important to them. In college, many of their professors will try to lead them away from the church – and (according to Eph. 4:14) they will use trickery and deceit to achieve their goals. But being a teaching assistant in a children's Sunday school class can strengthen teens in their understanding of and appreciation for scripture. This is true for older assistants as well, but the need to reach teens is critical today, for we are seeing young people abandon the church at an alarming rate.
- **Improved Quality of Teaching**
There are many other benefits to co-teaching – such that some teachers prefer to work with a partner even when they have no plans for discipleship or teacher training. These other benefits include better lessons in less time, improved skills, and instant momentum.