



More Than
STONE SOUP

A Stewardship and Giving Emphasis Program for Congregations

SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

We hear a lot about Christian Discipleship and we are, on occasion, confronted with a call, or invitation, to Christian Discipleship. Unfortunately, not everyone is familiar with the seven principles, or characteristics, of discipleship. A brief description of the seven principles is offered here in the hope that the principles will be taught within the congregation. The seven principles are the Sermon Theme for the Sunday following Stone Soup Sunday.

The Seven Principles, or disciplines, of Christian Discipleship are: Prayer, Study, Worship, Stewardship, Evangelism, Mentoring and Service. The seven can be organized into two groups: Relational Disciplines and Responsive Disciplines. The principles in each of the two groups will be addressed collectively.

The Relational disciplines, Prayer, Study and Worship, are just that, practices that build and strengthen our relationship with God. Much like the three legs on the proverbial milk-maid's stool, all three principles are necessary if we are to grow and mature in our faith and relationship with the Trinity. The milk-maid would find it difficult, if not impossible, to remain seated comfortably and productively on the stool should even one of the legs be missing. Our discipleship becomes equally unstable if we fail in our faithfulness to one or more of the disciplines. Yet on average, ninety percent or more of parishioners are not involved in an organized weekly Bible study. About the same percentage are not engaged in regular daily prayer and about one-third of all church members are not consistent in regular worship.

THE RELATIONAL DISCIPLINES

The discipline or principle of Prayer goes beyond corporate prayer during worship. This discipline involves addressing God in private prayer several times a day. It involves praying for oneself and for others. Discipleship means setting a regular time slot aside for meeting God in prayer—and honoring that 'appointment' daily. Inviting others to join them in prayer is a common occurrence for Christian disciples. Christian disciples give all of life to God in prayer, the bad and the good, and then trust God to place his best construction on all that follows.

Much like prayer, the Study principle demands more than sermon time during worship. Dedicating time each day for private Bible study along with weekly participation in a structured Bible study group is typical for Christian disciple. Under capable leadership a

study group provides a place for discussion, questioning and growing in an understanding of God and his will. Reading of suitable books and other materials will further the nurturing process.

The mention of Worship usually brings to mind a Sunday morning assembly of the faithful in a church sanctuary. For the Christian disciple, faithfulness to a regular regime of corporate worship goes without saying. For many, that one hour per week in worship seems all to inadequate. For many, mid-week worship is also a significant part of their discipline.

The three relational disciplines are so important to the faith nurturing process that some Christian disciples have set aside a special place in the home where quiet time each day can be spent in the reading of Scripture, in meditation and in prayer.

It is the relational disciplines that prepare us for a life of discipleship. The deeper the relationship we have with God the more secure we are in our salvation, and the more committed and better prepared we are for our service to God and the Church. To build a church of committed disciples requires a large number of the members be to involved in relational activities beyond a one hour weekly worship service. Aggressively teaching and encouraging members to embark on a daily practice of Prayer, Study and Worship is essential to building a healthy, vibrant congregation.

THE RESPONSIVE DISCIPLINES

Acts of service offered in the name of God are the direct result of the relationship we have with him. For example, those with a strong faith are more likely to share their faith with others. A strong trust in God, and an understanding of God's generosity encourages generous giving. A similar parallel can be drawn between strong faith and mentoring those new to the faith, and in service to others. These acts, fruits of the Spirit, done in Christ's name comprise the final four principles, or disciplines, that are the mark of Christian Discipleship. They are Stewardship, Evangelism, Mentoring those new to the faith, and Service in Christ's name.

The offering of sacrifices to God can be traced back to the early chapters of Genesis. It has always been God's expectation that we give to him. The method of giving, as well as the repository for sacrifices have both changed over the years, but the need to give to God has not. In today's church culture the sacrifice is known as an offering, and the principle is known as "Stewardship."

Old Testament giving involved tithes of ten percent, or more, paid directly to the Temple. This was Old Testament law, and was pretty much cast in stone. As with so many religious traditions, this concept changed with the coming of Christ. Post Resurrection giving expectations were redefined in the teachings of the apostle, Paul. In the sixteenth chapter of his letter to Corinth, Paul offers a plan for faithful stewardship. From his teaching, we understand that giving is to be carefully planned, and not left to chance. We are to consciously decide upon a regular amount of our income that is to be allocated each payday as our sacrifice to God. The amount allocated should be proportionate to ones income, and it should be pragmatically set aside each time our paycheck arrives. Christian Disciples are called to be "first fruits" givers, giving to God first, and then managing the remainder to our

benefit. Paul teaches that God comes first. What is given to God must come off the top. Sunday morning is not the time to quickly determine the amount we will give. What goes into our offering envelope is a serious issue. Christian disciples do not leave these decisions to the spur of the moment, nor does the stewardship principle allow giving to God to be decided by the amount of our “leftovers.”

Another of the responsive principles is Evangelism. It’s an undisputable fact, some congregations grow while others shrink and sometimes fail altogether. Upon looking to Scripture and God’s plan for ministry in an effort to understand this, we are soon confronted with the concept of “discipleship” and what it is that Christian disciples are called to do. When considered within the context of vocation we realize the following: bakers bake, salesmen sell, plumbers plumb, pilots pilot, truckers truck, builders build and bookkeepers keep books. That’s what they do. That is their role in life.

In the church, the role of the disciple is to make more disciples. This principle has been known over the years as “Evangelism,” and more recently as simply “sharing our faith.” That’s what Christian disciples do. Disciples are called to share their faith in such a way that others are attracted to Christ, are called into a relationship with him and join in the ministry of the church. That said, a willingness among members to reach out to others dramatically determines the ability of any given congregation just to survive—moreover become healthy and vibrant in ministry. Let’s face the reality of the matter; a congregation that is unwilling to reach out in an effort to make more disciples, who is unwilling to work God’s plan, really has no reason to survive—and will certainly die. If bakers don’t bake, we have no bread. If builders don’t build, we have no structures. If disciples don’t disciple, we have no church! Those who might be unhappy with this analogy need to understand it is God’s plan we are considering here, not our own, and God didn’t provide a “Plan B” for our consideration.

The role played by Christian disciples, as evangelist, really is significant. The Alban Institute, a well respected research organization, did a study on church growth. In their study it was discovered that eighty-six percent of all new members joining a mainline denomination church—an ELCA congregation, for example—had some prior personal connection to the congregation they joined. In other words, they knew somebody at the church before they ever stepped foot in the door, and were attracted to the church because of an existing relationship. As Christian Disciples, we must recognize and accept the key role we have been given when it comes to maintaining and growing the Kingdom of God. Invitational Evangelism is a key principle in Christian Discipleship.

Not all believers are at the same place in their faith walk. Many are new to the faith and have very little if any knowledge of either Scripture or God. It becomes the role of the Christian disciple to Mentor or teach those who are new converts. Those to be mentored in the faith can range from young children who are members of Sunday Schools to those who have never heard of God. In between these two extremes are people who may have fallen away from their relationship with God, folks who know of God but have never come to *know* him, and those who are recent converts to Christianity—have never practiced Christian discipleship in the past. All are in need of teaching. For that matter, Evangelists, too, have need to be evangelized from time to time.

Principles to be taught are as diverse as are the recipients of our mentoring. These might include basic Bible stories, Catechism classes, adult Christian education, instruction in the theology and doctrines as subscribed to by the judicatory, and specialized training for specific ministry endeavors. Sometimes mentoring is no more than being there for someone, answering questions and explaining things as the mentored grow and mature in their faith walk. This much is certain, the Christian disciple mentors others with the specific intent of nurturing new believers to a point of becoming, themselves, Christian disciples who then carry on with living and teaching the seven principles to others. Disciples developing more disciples; that is what Christian discipleship is all about.

The last discipleship principle is as old as religion itself; Service to others in God's name. Scripture instructs us as to the importance of this particular principle with verbiage like, "When you do it to the least of these, you do it unto me."

Christian disciples need not go looking for opportunities to perform service in Christ's name. Simply opening oneself to an awareness of surroundings will reveal all the ministry opportunities necessary for filling a lifetime with service to others. For some, the attraction to service will focus on the ills of the secular world. From attending to the basic needs of the poor to addressing the loneliness of the elderly and homebound, much can be found upon which to build a meaningful ministry. Others will be attracted to service within local congregations or to ministry connected with local, regional and national judicatories. All are important and meaningful for furthering the Kingdom. All are a function of Christian discipleship.

IN SUMMARY

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul addresses church leaders with these words, "Let a man so consider us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful." (1 Cor. 4:1 NKJV) So clearly stated by the Apostle, yet so clearly misunderstood by much of Christendom, is the need to teach parishioners the basics of faith practices. Indeed, the necessity goes far beyond a mere need to teach—but exists as a requirement, a command, addressed to all churches who claim the label "Christian" as their own.

For the committed Christian, these Seven Principles of Christian Discipleship are not an option, but a way of life. The seven principles are how we live out our faith within the Call of our Baptism. The principles are essential for healthy congregations, to be aggressively taught and encouraged in every congregation, no matter the judicatory affiliation. For the sake of our Lord and Savior, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of Christian churches everywhere, and for the sake of our broken world – may we, as Stewards of the mysteries of the faith – be found faithful.