

Why We Should Trust Divine Processes of Discipleship



God's processes are far more complex, more subtle and involve many more factors and time than ours. When the Lord produces a disciple He produces them in a series of communities: their home, a local church, an active missional community such as a campus group, and as a witness to society as a whole. And God disciplines us existentially through our prayer life, through a cloud of heavenly witnesses, through spiritual experiences and, of course, through the Word of God.

As well as that we have times when we are directly taught by the Holy Spirit, the anointing He has given us to teach us all things (John 14:26, 1 John 2:20,27) and who teaches us the deep things of God - that eyes has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man - which however which are revealed to us by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). So that Jesus could say to Peter: *You are blessed, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal it to you, but My Father in Heaven.*

However God's processes seem to take too long and to beyond easy reproduction by an organization that does not want to have to rely on the Holy Spirit "turning up" before it can train new leaders. The contrast between divine discipleship and human discipleship is illustrated in the following diagram:

DIVINE PROCESS (aging wine)	HUMAN MANUFACTURE (pop soda)
Natural, cultured, alive Takes a long time Need to trust God for some of the outcome	Artificial, sterile, sometimes toxic Instantaneous Total control down to the tiniest detail
Infused with culture, history and location Produces very high value when it works well e.g. a \$1000 bottle of wine, a perfect cheese etc There is a sense of grace and peace about it Qualitative measure of success (mainly)	Alienated from cultural context Produces a huge amount of relatively low-value product of great uniformity. Hurried striving Quantitative measure of production (mainly)
True Christian discipleship in community filled with the Spirit and iron sharpening iron,	Commercialized Christianity, promise of instant transformation, cheap grace, wood, hay stubble

The discipleship processes of commercial Christianity are very uniform, standardized, testable and reliable and rapidly produce an immature disciple, full of “fizz”, and not much more. These discipleship processes are too quick, too individualized, too cognitive and without the conflict and tension necessary for growth.

Only long-term exposure to a series of living communities can produce patient endurance, long-suffering, compassion and agape love. The apostles were first discipled in their homes and synagogues then in a missional community with Jesus, and then as part of the early church where the deep tensions produced maturity. Finally their interaction with society, persecution and eventual martyrdom completed their growth in Christ.

Which brings us back to the essential goodness of divine processes whether they be making wine, maturing cheese, making and baking bread, or even the growth of a child in the womb. Divine processes involve a series of extremely complex interactions. Even scientific study does not quite unlock everything. We are always left with some element of mystery. There is simply no good artificial wine.

And we need to respect this infinite complexity of the hand of God! As disciple-makers we need to realize we are only 5% of the equation at best. Those we train are being molded by God through suffering, through relationships, through challenging tasks, through their own spiritual experiences and by hundreds of other people.

People are even discipled by their own actions and reactions and the consequences thereof. If they are wise they learn “this works well” and “that does not work at all”. If we are teachable, then we teach ourselves (at least to some extent).

We can, at best, train someone in a particular skill such as biblical exegesis, time management or how to handle criticism. This is where the books and DVDs and informational approach come in. Books such as the Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman have been a big help to millions because they were focused on one discrete, teachable and communicable skill.

The success in the small testbed can lead us to the illusion that if people read enough such books and watch a couple of hundred DVDs that they will become very good Christians. Unfortunately this is false!

Knowledge needs to be put into action in community. We need to learn how to love one another, forgive one another, forbear with one another, pray for one another, provoke one another to good works, and encourage one another.

This requires three ingredients:

- a) A relatively stable community to practice the one-another skills in.
- b) Enough stress, pain and difficulty so the people need encouragement, prayer, love and so on
- c) Enough conflict so that forgiveness and forbearance are absolutely essential.

Now most classrooms exclude stress and conflict by design. And most of the time you cannot have much community by just sitting in chairs and facing forwards!

On the other hand, we see Jesus very consciously and deliberately exposing his disciples to stress, difficulty, pain, confusion, conflict, grief, fear and even the profound disappointment of the Cross.

Divine discipleship is mentoring in the midst of mess.

The ‘program’ is set by God, and consists of the disciple’s life circumstances, challenges, difficulties with prayer, need to overcome unbelief and the requirement to master the basics of ministry. The mentor points out a way ahead and encourages, rebukes and exhorts the disciple into works of righteousness, primarily through the Scriptures:

2 Timothy 3:16-17 MKJV *All Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished to every good work.*

The outcome of discipleship should be a perfected and matured saint. This is a qualitative result; it is building with gold, silver and precious gemstones, polishing and perfecting the disciple until he or she reflects the glory of God (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). This is a complete contrast to building with wood, hay or stubble, which can produce huge

“haystacks” (institutions) very quickly but without any quality or glory. Such immature aggrandizement is said to be “burned up” in the Day of Judgement.

Observe how community is seen as central to divine discipleship in the following passage in Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:11-16 MKJV *And truly He gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, (12) for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (13) And this until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; (14) so that we no longer may be infants, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, in the dishonesty of men, in cunning craftiness, to the wiles of deceit. (15) But that you, speaking the truth in love, may in all things grow up to Him who is the Head, even Christ; (16) from whom the whole body, fitted together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of each part, producing the growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love.*

We find a multitude of instructors (everything is plural: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) working with a multitude of people (the whole body). Love is emphasized twice and agape love, by its very nature, requires Christian community. Then there is mutuality “fitted together....by which every joint supplies”.

And the outcome of discipleship is entirely qualitative: the perfecting of the saints, the unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, a full-grown man, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, no longer being infants, growing up, and self-edification.

These divine results are far beyond the reach of any human program, no matter how well-intended. They are the result of prayer, of the Word, and of God at work in an obedient community of grace. Jim and Nancy may require totally different life lessons from God.

I am not totally repudiating cognitive content. It has helped me, and it helps many. However it is only a contributing factor. I have also seen people change drastically after a motorbike accident! God will use many, many things to shape us and to teach us.

We need to acknowledge that God has His processes of Christ-like transformation and that we can never replace community and conflict and struggle and the mysterious ways of the Spirit with even the best classroom experience. Classrooms produce clones. God produces quirky saints. (Just take a long, hard look at the heroes of faith).

God led Moses through 40 years in Midian which, today, would be seen as a total waste of time. The Lord also sent the “clearly ready” Paul off to Arabia for 14 years. Fine wine takes time. There often needs to be a crushing of the grapes.

It is difficult to trust the untidy ways of God. It is frustrating to walk with a single individual through many years until things finally “click”. It is messy to create an adventurous Christian community that is on mission for God.

But if we don’t want “pop-soda” disciples this is what we MUST do. Enthusiasm is no substitute for holiness and good character, and “being Bible buddies” is not the least bit like agape love. We have to figure out what God is doing today in the life of the disciple and then cooperate with that, as a holy friend, as iron-sharpening-iron, with the solid faith that God will use it for good in the end.

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