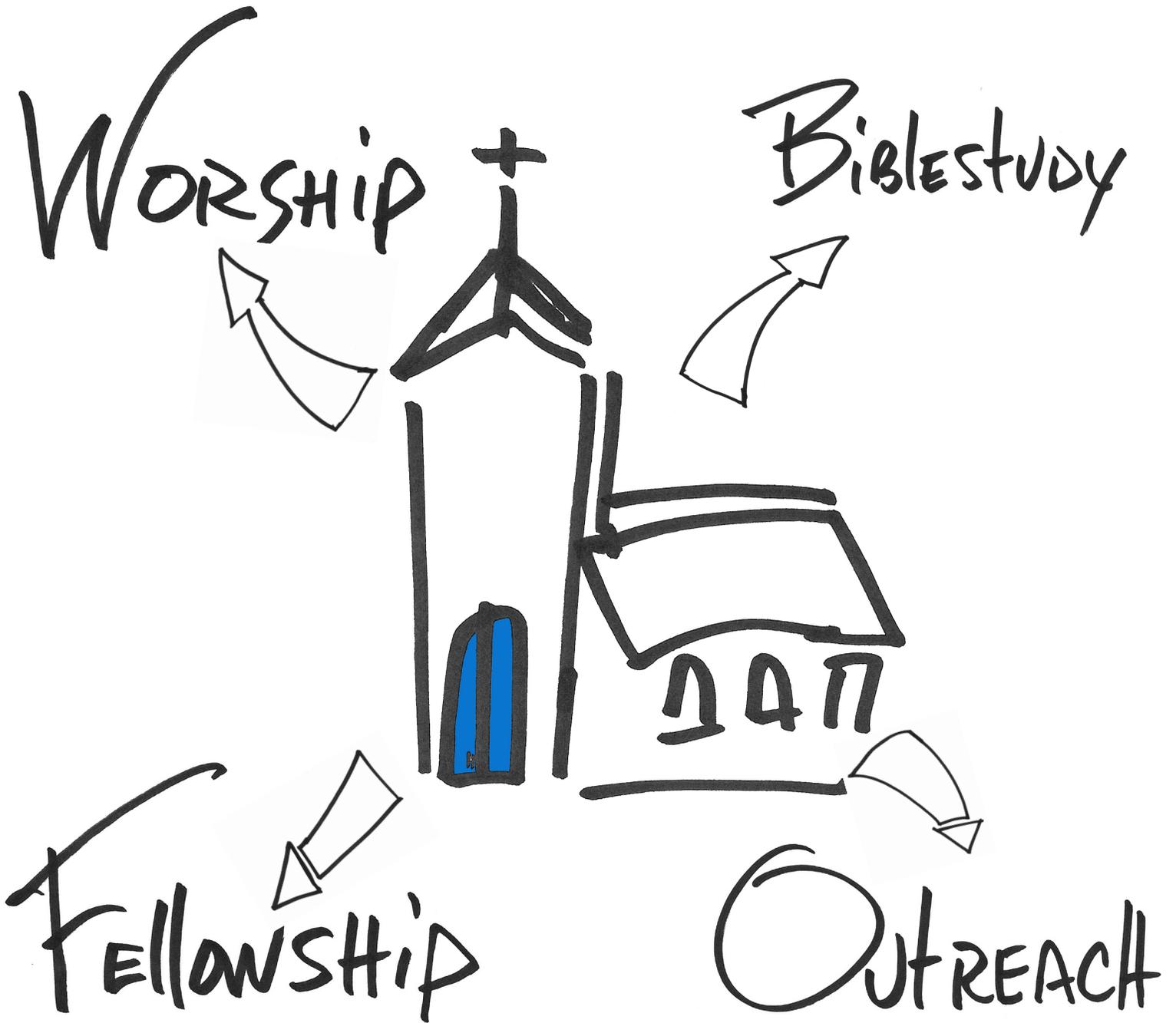


# Discipleship

by Tony Evans



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If you want to find out what mattered most to someone, read his last words. Usually, whatever a person considers to be most important is on his mind when he comes to his last days on earth. That's why we pay so much attention to last words, especially of people important to us.

As those who seek to be obedient followers of Jesus Christ, we need to know what matters most to Him so it can matter most to us. Thankfully, we don't have to wonder about it. After His resurrection from the dead, and just before His ascension back into heaven, Jesus told His disciples – and us – what was uppermost on His mind. His last words on earth are recorded for us in Matthew 28:18-20.

Notice verse 19: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”** There it is – the mission of the church, stated in clear and concise terms: *to disciple the people of God so that they affect the world for Christ*. If Christ's mandate for the church is to make disciples, then His will for us as individual believers is that we would become disciples through the process of personal spiritual growth. The way we achieve Christ's will for us is what we're going to talk about in this ebook.

To grow spiritually as a disciple of Christ means that we become like Him. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 10:25 **“It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher.”** So becoming a disciple is where we ought to be heading in our Christian lives. This is the goal toward which discipleship is because before we can begin the process we have to see and understand the goal for which we're aiming.

Let me say right off that being a disciple, getting down to the essentials of the Christian life, is a lot different than just going to church once or twice a week. To get

excited because the preacher moved you and the choir inspired you is nice, but that's not spiritual growth.

The goal and the cornerstone of our activity, that which brings God the most glory, is for us to become disciples. God's goal is not salvation; that is just the introduction to God's goal. His desire is that those who are saved become disciples.

It is not enough simply to say: “I'm on my way to heaven.” The issue is, are you becoming like the One who is taking you to heaven? That's discipleship, and that's what Christ wants from us. Let me give you a working definition of discipleship. Discipleship is *that developmental process that progressively brings Christians from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they are then able to reproduce the process with someone else*.

Notice that this brings discipleship around full circle. Disciples are to turn around and make other disciples. Ultimately, that's how we fulfill the mandate of Matthew 28:18-20.

## The Concept of Discipleship

Discipleship was not a new idea in the New Testament times. It was a well-established concept in the Greek world in the centuries before Christ. The word disciple means “learner, student,” and the Greeks had disciples in the realm of philosophy.

Plato, often called the “father of philosophy,” developed a system of thought that dealt with issues of epistemology, or how we gain knowledge, and issues related to the meaning of life. Plato disciplined his student Aristotle, who took what he had learned and built “gymnasiums,” or academies.

In the ancient world, gymnasiums were not arenas for sporting events. They were training centers to teach students Plato's thought and the system developed by Aristotle, known as Aristotelian logic. The students thus trained were "gymnatized," which is the verb form of the Greek word for gymnasium.

So successful was this discipling process that it allowed the Greeks to influence the whole Greco-Roman world. This process was called "Hellenization," in which people who were not Greek began to adopt Greek thinking, language, and culture. That was all part of this concept of discipleship.

The New Testament picked up this concept and put it in a spiritual context so we would know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship involves an apprenticeship in which the apprentice, or student, is brought toward a particular goal.

## The Four Essentials of Discipleship

Few people would disagree that the greatest church in history was the first church, the church at Jerusalem in the early chapters of Acts. This church was on fire, possessed by the Holy Spirit, exploding on the scene on the Day of Pentecost.

One reason this church was so dynamic is that it got off to a great start. Jesus had told the disciples in Acts 1:8, "Don't have church until the Holy Spirit shows up" (in my personal paraphrase). They obeyed Him, and the Spirit showed up in great power at Pentecost.

Acts 2 shows that this church made an impact not only on those within it but they also made a far-reaching impact that transformed those around them. It did this

through four vital, Spirit-inspired experiences that are necessities for those who would follow Christ in discipleship. These four experiences are meant to operate simultaneously in our lives as we grow and develop. They include outreach (witnessing), growing in the Word, fellowship and worship, and are laid out for us clearly in one key verse, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42)



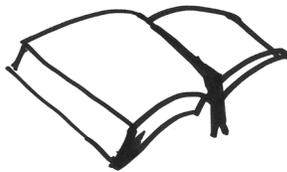
## Outreach

When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, the church became a catalyst for change. They offered themselves as a witness for Jesus Christ. Evangelism is one of the absolute necessities for being a disciple. The most obvious event of the church's witness in Acts 2 was

Peter's great Pentecost sermon. This is the same Peter who, just a few weeks earlier, was too scared to admit he even knew Jesus. What changed Peter? Acts 2 tells us that the Holy Spirit had taken control of Peter. He was about to take off and soar in his spiritual life. He would experience things he had never experienced before because now he will be a faithful witness for Jesus Christ.

One of the things you must ask God to do if you're going to grow as a Christian is to help you open your mouth and be a witness. You may say, "But I'm not bold. I'm a private person." Well, the fact is that most of us are only private when we want to be. I've met a lot of "private" people who become very vociferous when their favorite team takes to the field or the court. In other words, when something exciting enough happens in your life, you will talk about it without a whole lot of prompting. Anyone who is so private that he or she never talks about anything that matters has to be a pretty boring person.

## BIBLE STUDY



One reason a lot of us Christians don't share Christ is that we've lost our excitement about Christ. When He is exciting to you, you can't keep Him to yourself. When something dynamic occurs internally, you want to express it externally. The believers who

received the Spirit on Pentecost became witnesses. The result of their witness and Peter's sermon on that special day was the addition of 3000 new believers to the body of Christ. Now that's a witness! And please notice that these 3000 people did not come because of an evangelistic program. They came because God's people were overwhelmed of His Spirit. They were excited about Jesus.

## Growing In The Word

Along with their dynamic witness, these early believers were growing in their knowledge of God's Word. Scriptural education is the second necessity for being a disciple.

This is the process by which the Word of God gets off the page and into our lives. A disciple of Jesus Christ is a person for whom the Word of God is as necessary and desirable as food is for the body. It is Scripture that equips us to live the Christian life. Your mind is the key to becoming a disciple, because you are what you think about (Proverbs 23:7). If you've got a messed-up mind, you're going to have a messed-up life. The body reflects the thought processes of the mind, and many of us have come into the Christian life with warped minds, contaminated by an ungodly world.

Our minds need to be renewed (Romans 12:2). Only then will our lives be transformed. I've discovered that when you try to change people's actions without changing their thinking, you only do a temporary, patchwork job. If you want to fix what you do, you must first fix how you think about what you do. A transformed mind comes through the study and practice of the Bible.

All of us know about brainwashing. It's repeating certain data over and over again until a person absorbs that data into his brain, believes it wholeheartedly, and begins to act on it. That's what the Word of God is designed to do. Many of us have habits in our lives that we want to get rid of. But we say, "I can't" because we've been brainwashed by the enemy to believe we will never have victory in this area.

But God's Word can change that, if we will feed on it regularly the way we feed our bodies. The believers in Acts 2 devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. If you are going to become a disciple, you must have a dynamic experience with the Bible. When it comes to our spiritual education, we have a divine Teacher – the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit would remind us of all that He taught (John 14:26).

You may say, "Sure, Tony, if Jesus would come and teach our Sunday school class next Sunday, we would get excited about the Word." Well, that isn't going to happen. But you have something better. You have the indwelling Spirit to make God's Word come alive. He is eager to set your heart on fire.

## Life-Changing Fellowship

The third necessary experience in following Christ is also found in Acts 2:42. Along with devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, the believers were devoted to fellowship. Biblical fellowship is not just coffee and donuts in Sunday school, or a meal in the fellowship hall. Fellowship is the sharing of our lives with other believers. You'll never grow to full maturity in Jesus Christ all by yourself. You cannot become a disciple of Jesus Christ independently of others.

That's why the church is so important. It is the "fireplace" where one log touches another and the fire is maintained. The church at Jerusalem not only shared their lives with one another, they shared their possessions as needs arose (v. 44-45). That's part of fellowship too. If you are getting dull in your spiritual



life, you need to be in proximity to others who are on fire so their fire can ignite you. If you are losing your spiritual fire and you're alone, you're going to become ashes. Are you connected with other believers who desire to be on fire too? Fellowship is designed to keep the fire burning. There was no such thing as a non-churched Christian in the New Testament. They were in dynamic fellowship with each other.

We need each other because the best of us can get spiritually dull and want to throw in the towel. The best of us sometimes fall flat on our faces. The Bible reminds us, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12) because falling is often right around the corner.

Back in the days of slavery, Sunday was a very important day. It was the day the slaves didn't have to work. But more important, they would come together for worship, and then devote a major part of the day

to fellowship. One sister would bring the potato salad, another sister the fried chicken, and still another the corn. They would enjoy a meal together.

That Sunday fellowship was so important to the slaves because they all had to go back to slave work on Monday. Monday was painful, with heartaches and headaches. So the reinforcement of Sunday was critical. But as we have become more affluent and more independent, we've lost our need for one another. Fellowship in the Bible was designed to show you that you need other believers. You can't make it on your own, and neither can I.

## Dynamic Worship

The fourth necessity in following Christ is worship. Again in Acts 2:42, the believers devoted themselves to **“the breaking of bread and to prayer.”** They were going to the temple every day and praising God continually.

Worship is the furnace of the spiritual life. Worship is the celebration of God for who He is and what He has done. The issue in worship is not necessarily what you get out of it, but what God gets out of it. Praising God, worshipping Him, celebrating God for who He is and what He has done, are the ways to get God's attention. God responds to our worship. In fact, God invites us to worship Him. He has taken the initiative.

You will be surprised at the way the Spirit of God will ignite your Christian life when worship becomes not an event, but an experience; not a program, but a way of life. That includes both public and private worship because both are critical for a growing disciple of Christ.

Many of us want to quit when something goes wrong. But our spiritual ancestors didn't throw in the towel when their whole world went wrong. Why? Because

many of them had what we don't have – a worshipping lifestyle. No matter what is wrong in your life, there is always a reason for celebrating God, exalting Him for what He has done.

What happens when you become a witnessing, learning-the-Word, fellowshiping, worshipping kind of disciple? If those four experiences are a part



of your normal Christian life, I guarantee that you will be progressing in your discipleship. When we submit to the Spirit of God that He might cultivate those things in us, we are going to see exciting results. The early believers had the four necessities going strong, and Scripture indicates that at least two things happened: They had spiritual power and they saw spiritual results.

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