

***Life on Life Discipleship***  
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Have you ever noticed how much “life on life” there seems to be in the New Testament witness? Driven by the mandate to “make disciples of every nation,” we hear Paul say such things as “*imitate* us because we were not idle when we were *with* you” (2Th.3:7). And with respect to Paul’s exhortation to “remember your leaders” he further explains’ “consider the outcome of their *way of life*, and *imitate* their faith” (Heb 13:7). And of course, there is the many “one another” exhortations. Accordingly, Randy Pope has offered as good a definition of “life on life discipleship” as I can find:

Life-on-life discipleship is not curriculum-on-life. We believe that discipleship happens because of relationships, not because of books or materials. *There is something organic* that takes place in discipleship even as one works through engineered content. Although there is a learning component to discipleship, the focus is on living and sharing truth, not merely learning it.

Now if we think about this theologically for a moment, it all assumes a very real *and local*, if not also spiritually mediated, presence of Christ acting in/with/through *life on life discipleship* within the body of Christ! It’s all so... well... *sacramental* sounding isn’t it? And then it occurs to me, might this be the forgotten element that many throughout church history have been looking for in search for the *flesh of Christ* vis-à-vis the Eucharistic meal? Not of course literally, as by the transubstantiation of our flesh to become Christ’s literal flesh. But as mediated by the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ wherein *our* flesh becomes the visible, manifestation of Christ’s flesh in the midst of us acting in real-time, “life on life” ways. The ascended Christ *continues* to descend even today that He might “fill all in all.” This is the theological premise of sacramentalism. It is evidently the same theological premise related to life on life discipleship per Ephesians 4:7ff and the divine institution of pastoral ministry even.

Generally speaking, Martin Luther aptly summarized the sacramental implications of Christ’s flesh mediated in and through the “body of Christ” as follows:

It is our duty to let the benefit and fruit of the Lord's Supper become manifest, and we ought to show that we have received it with profit. We at present see it received throughout all the world in so many celebrations of the mass, but where do you see the least fruit following from it? Now this is the fruit, that even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words. As if to say, Here am I myself, given for you, and this treasure do I give to you; what I have you shall have; when you are in want, then will I also be in want; here, take my righteousness, life, and salvation, that neither sin, nor death, nor hell, nor any sorrow may overcome you; as long as I am righteous and alive, so long shall you also be righteous and alive. These are the words he speaks to us; these we must take, and repeat them to our neighbor, not by the mouth alone, but by our actions, saying, Behold, my dear brother, I have received my Lord; he is mine, and I have more than enough and great abundance. Now you take what I have, it shall be yours, and I place it at your disposal. Is it necessary for me to die for you, I will even do that. The goal placed before us in the Lord's Supper is that the attainment of such conduct toward our neighbor may appear in us.

My point is this: Our tradition has always affirmed that the life giving presence of Christ is really and even locally present in/with/through the word and sacrament, albeit spiritually mediated, each week in worship. We do well therefore "not to forsake assembling together" (Heb 10:25) in order to participate in the full gospel of Christ. But shouldn't we acknowledge as much concerning the divine institution of "life on life" discipleship per the above scriptures as well (c.f. Rom 12:1-5 and also *WCF* chapter 20!)? Is it enough to just "show up" on Sundays but then to neglect the more relational aspects of life-on-life discipleship through small groups and one-on-one contexts? This year at CPC for instance, we are focusing on the formation of highly accessible prayer societies that meet throughout the day and week. We continue to encourage everyone to participate in one of the many CPC community groups. And we have specifically targeted our Sunday mornings to involve more life-on-life interactions within smaller groups of men, women and young married contexts.

Needless to say, I hope the reader is invested in the life changing presence of Christ in weekly sacramental worship! And yet, I hope as well that the reader is not suffering from the neglect of the oft "forgotten sacramental element" of the flesh of Christ as mediated in/with/thorough the life on life discipleship of the body of Christ.

As an historical aside, I find it very interesting that the church has tended to rightly emphasis the public aspects of sacramental union with Christ through word and sacrament, and yet has tended to neglect life-on life discipleship as related to our union with Christ. (Not a few non-church Christian ministries have been formed in response!) And yet there are some significant historical instances where this was specifically targeted within the church even. I think here of two classic pastoral theologies, both written from within the reformed tradition and both written with a specific interest in rediscovering discipleship in the church vis-à-vis "life of life" sorts of programs. One was penned by Martin Bucer under the title *On the Care of Souls...* and included the chapter *What The Principal Work And Activity Of Carers Of Souls And Ministers Are To Be For The Flock Of Christ In General And Individual Members In Particular*" (1538). The other was written by Richard Baxter with the title "The Reformed Pastor" and then the subtitle that conclude, *Especially in Private Instruction and Catechizing...* (1862). What Baxter refers to as "taking heed to the flock" for instance is very clearly related to the life on life aspects of shepherding the flock of God.

*Our first care must be about the whole: and therefore the first duties to be done are public duties which are done to the whole. as our people are bound to prefer public duties before private, so are we much more. But this is so commonly confessed, that I shall say no more of it.*

*But that which is less understood or considered of is that all the flock, even each individual members of our charge, must be taken heed of, and watched over by us in our ministry. To which end it is to be presupposed necessary that... we should know every person that belongeth to our charge; for how can we take heed to them if we do not know them? Or how can we take that heed that belongeth to the special charge that we have undertaken if we know not who be of our charge and who not though we know the persons? Our obligation is not to all neighbor churches, or to all stragglers, so great as it is to those whom we are set over...*

*All the flock thus being known, must afterward be heeded. One would think all reasonable men would be satisfied of that and it should need not future proof. Doth a careful shepherd look after every individual sheep? And a good schoolmaster look to every individual scholar, both for instruction and correction?... Why then should not the teachers, the pastors, the*

*physicians, the guides of the churches of Christ take heed to every individual member of their charge? (Luke 15)*

And then there was Jonathan Edwards. Given my perception of Edwards as a great teacher-pulpit orator, I confess I was shocked to discover that he too sought to correct an under-developed focus on “life on life” discipleship in his church, especially as concerned his passion for personal and corporate revival. It led to what might have been the first “small group” strategy in America! Here is the way he described it.

*In the fall of the year 1734 I proposed it to the young people that they should agree among themselves to spend the evenings after lectures in social religion, and to that end divide themselves into several companies to meet in various parts of the town; which was accordingly done, and those meetings have been since continued and the example imitated by elder people. (Edwards, “A Narrative of Surprising Conversion.*

### **Ecclesial Discipleship Explored:**

What is discipleship? Simply put, a “disciple” is a “follower of Christ.” To ask then the question of “discipleship at CPC” is to ask the question “How are people enabled more and more to be in communion with Christ and to follow Him in all aspect of their lives.

“We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we might present everyone mature in Christ.” (Colossians 1:28)

Scripture describes the process of becoming mature in Christ as “being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory” (II Corinthians 3:18). This transformation is linked to biblical disciple building, a process that leads to Christ-like maturity. Jesus put it this way: “When a disciple is fully trained, he will become like his Teacher.” (Luke 6:40)

To be sure, the term can be used to describe anything and everything that a church does mediates Christ’s life transforming presence through the appointed means of grace in word, sacrament and one anothering. Within our tradition the term “discipline” in its full sense could be substituted for “discipleship.”

1. The positive Dimension: "teaching to observe all that Jesus commanded"  
Matt. 28:18-20  
1 Tim.4:6-16
2. The prevenient dimension: "watching over souls to prevent their going astray. (This dimension is implicit whenever the officers are referred to as "shepherds.")  
Heb. 13:17  
1 Peter 5:1-4
3. The remedial dimension: "correcting or pronouncing judgment on the wayward."  
1 Cor. 5  
2 Tim. 2:24-26  
1 Tim. 1:19-20

### **BCO 27-4:**

The power which Christ has given the Church is for building up, and not for

destruction. It is to be exercised as under a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath. As in the preaching of the Word the wicked are doctrinally separated from the good, so by discipline the Church authoritatively separates between the holy and the profane. In this it acts the part of a tender mother, correcting her children for their good, that every one of them may be presented faultless in the day of the Lord Jesus. Discipline is systematic training under the authority of God's Scripture. No communing or non-communing member of the Church should be allowed to stray for the Scripture's discipline. Therefore, teaching elders must: a) instruct the officers in discipline, b) instruct the Congregation in discipline, c) jointly practice it in the context of the congregation and church courts.

The means of grace involve both public actions for the good of the whole and private actions that are more intimately related to the good of individuals. In recent times however, the term "discipleship" has tended to focus more on the private oriented actions as often related to a wholistic view of "church discipline" (c.f. above) and/or what Randy Pope describes as "life on life" discipleship

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(Example: What happens at the Men' "Marriage Counseling" party, or perhaps also some of the women's showers??)

For the sake of our present conversation, notwithstanding our need to consider always our public actions of discipleship, we will speak of "discipleship" as to consider the "life on life" aspects of Christian discipleship at CPC involving more personal and intimate interactions.

### **Theological Vision:**

It is also interesting to consider a theological vision for discipleship that would flow forth from a doctrine of "local presence." E.g. The local presence of Christ in/with/through the local means of grace in the church would inform the principle of discipline (disciplineship) no less than the principle of sacrament and word. In all of these cases, there are some things that are elemental as set forth by positive divine institution in scripture, and some things that are vernacular and set forth as directed by scripture together with the light of nature (common wisdom) per the circumstances common to a particular context.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

In other words, Christ is present not just generally, but locally as through a spirit filled ministry of discipleship. This locality extends not just through what the church does jointly, but severally as through those appointed by God to "shepherd the flock of God... exercising oversight... being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2,3)

Accordingly, one way to state the question of discipleship at CPC is to consider, How might Christ be most fully present, both in watchful care and oversight and in “life-on-life” interactions with those ordained as under shepherds, those who Peter says “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder...” Or stated differently, how can we more fully mediate the local presence of Christ severally relative to the individual member through a more intentional and proactive “life-on-life” encounters with Christ being mediated through the means of grace in Christian discipleship or “pastoral care of souls.” Or, albeit mediated through the “carers of souls,” Jesus is among us to train us, to mentor us, an example to us, to discipline us and to watch over us—locally, really and “transformationally” *present*, life-on-life!

### **From Theological Vision to Practice:**

From what I can tell from the readings in pastoral theology and more recent attempts at understanding Christian discipleship, there seems to be universal agreement concerning the practice of Christian discipleship along the following lines:

- 1) **It must be intentional**—We could say that disciples are “made” not born. To be sure it assumes birth, but like a newborn infant, and assuming God’s providential care (Psm 139), we are also charged as parents to “train up a child in the way he should go...” As any parent knows, such “parenting” can not be left to chance and/or done flippantly without a well thought out plan and personal discipline. What then needs to be planned and acted upon in order for us at CPC to be more intentional in our “life-on-life” oriented discipleship (as distinguished from just life-on-life general socialization)?
- 2) **It must be whole life**—Discipleship is not just about what we do at church, but how we engage the whole of life as an expression of our being in communion with Christ in terms of Christian identity, character and mission. *Being in Communion with Christ is not just something we do on Sunday, and then go back to talking, feeling, acting throughout the week as if Christ and his will for our lives in scripture doesn’t really matter.* Its the universality of Christ’s Lordship and mission informing the universality of our lives that discipleship is after. What then needs to be the content of our conversations in discipleship that will involve whole life spirituality?
- 3) **It must be confessional**-- Discipleship involves the whole counsel of God’s will in scripture as confessed on a case by case basis in the process of being embraced and lived by a disciple of Christ. It is *catechism*, but it is much more, than catechism. It is helping people make the faith their own as to be expressed in the way they think, feel, plan... LIVE! All of this assumes more than teaching, but also accountability and follow-up. What system of accountability can we put in place that will enable more personal “buy-in” and experience of the word of God in all of life?
- 4) **It must be relational**—Discipleship involves person to person interactions wherein there is opportunity for both teaching and example, prayer and action, questions and answers, correction and absolution—all within a context of relational trust and confidence in union with Christ. Discipleship is a process for transferring spiritual life from one person to another. How can we better know and be in relation to the people at CPC such that we can be in a position to do the above?
- 5) **It must be ongoing and developmental** -- Discipleship is NOT a one time program, it is an ongoing program that may take many forms and involve many contexts wherein the above

four practices can be maintained. This is because spiritual growth, like natural growth, is developmental. This is clearly implied for instance in:

**1Cor. 3:2** I fed you with **milk**, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,

**Heb. 5:12** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need **milk**, not solid food, **13** for everyone who lives on **milk** is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child.

**1Pet. 2:2** Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual **milk**, that by it you may grow up into salvation—

And so for instance, at the very least we can discern from the above passages that one phase of Christian discipleship is a “milk” phase and another phase is “solid food” phase. Growth does not occur overnight. Just as a newborn baby develops gradually and only after much nourishment and the proper care, so it is with the new Christian. We should expect to drink milk before we can eat meat and to crawl before we can walk. Some have attempted to discern from scripture a more nuanced discernment of spiritual development. So for instance, based on various other attempts, I would suggest something along the following (note: A disciple doesn’t “graduate” from one phase to another as if to leave it and never return—each phase is ongoing through the rest of our lives as Christian disciples, we return to “First things” constantly, even as they are expanded constantly into greater and deeper knowledge and experience)

**1. Repentance & Faith**—A Gestation phase leading to profession of faith—involves discovering ourselves in our brokenness and sin such as then to lead to the discover of Christ as our savior and Lord. Were as most of the scripture assumes a knowledge of god, the focus here is on Christian apologetics and first things pertaining to the gospel. I think here of the first chapters of gospels and the “who is Jesus” focus and even

**2. Enlightenment & Guidance**—An Infant phase wherein a person learns the “basics” in terms of Christian faith and practice—a “foundations” phase learning to take baby steps in Christian disciplines and involvement in the church. (I think of the gospels and the focus in the early portions of introducing Christ and the Kingdom of God, especially sermon on the mount... But especially books like Galatians, Eph and even Romans... gospels the sermon on the mount and the clarifications of who Jesus is?)

**3. Ministry Training and Leadership Development**-- As per the steps of transfer, a more complete, nuanced and transferable understanding Christian faith and practice is developed and a vision for taking responsibility for others and the kingdom of God is developed. (I think of the gospel when the disciples were challenged “be ye fishers of men? Or 1 Timothy and Titus)

**4. Re-evaluation & Separation**—Perhaps at each level there is some aspect of re-evaluating our lives such as to discern how we are “in the world and not of the world”—but

it can be observed that when people stop doing this, that the whole process of discipleship stops—there is a “count the cost” aspect of discipleship that involves our relation to the world—moving from being of the world to being in the world, not of the, FOR the world. I suspect from my pastoral experience that most people have a season of life after some degree of growth and leadership in Christ’s church where they “re-evaluate” what till now has been a first level experience and theological journey—“Do I really believe xyz? Is it really worth my time to do xyz? Etc. Those who come through this without stumbling are better prepared to disciple others and have a much more nuanced and even “confessional” (vs. traditional) understanding of Christian faith and practice. (I think of the gospels when the disciples were brought to the question “Will you leave me too?” or the intent of 2 Tim.)

**5. Worldwide Vision/Ecumenism**—Beginning to grapple more with issues as they impact regional and global Christianity. Vision for Missions, Presbyterian/Regional Church Involvement, Missional Ecumenism, etc.

### **Application Questions:**

How can we better implement a “life on life” style of discipleship in ecclesial ministry?

1) Elder Discipleship... ,

- Spiritually Elder Men toward men?
- Spiritually Elder women toward women?

2) Regular Pastoral Visitation...

3) Small Group ministries....

4) Spiritual Mentoring across generations... etc.

### **Conclusion:**

Disciple building is a biblical imperative, a primary task for the Church (Matthew 28:19-20). It is the process by which more mature believers, in cooperation with God’s Spirit, assist less mature believers as they progress in their faith toward Christ like maturity, intimacy with God and good works. The goal of disciple building is maturity that glorifies God. (Definition taken from Worldwide Discipleship Association)