



Book Review

Real-Life Discipleship: Jim Putman (NavPress, 2010)



'If you set out to make disciples, you will inevitably build the church. If you set out to build the church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples. It is far more likely that you will create consumers who depend on the spiritual services that professionals . . . provide for them.'

Breen and Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture* (2009), p 6-7

I believe that Churches of Christ have exerted a lot of effort to give baptism its rightful emphasis. However, baptism serves as one of the steps to making disciples, not as an end in itself. What comes next requires equal attention. I recently heard a speaker ask, 'What path does a new convert take in your church to become an elder/deacon/ministry leader?' He then answered his question, saying 'the only pathway most churches have is longevity.'

The longer a new Christian attends worship services the more likely they'll be asked to serve. But the million dollar question is, 'Does attending worship services make someone a disciple?'

Jim Putman is a Christian Church minister who believes the answer to the previous question is 'No'. In his book, *Real-Life Discipleship*, Putman encourages churches to 'take the accidental out of discipleship'. 2 Timothy 2:2 demonstrates a model of discipleship. Paul teaches Timothy who teaches reliable men who teach others. God wants each of us to be disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Among Churches of Christ, certain congregations once known as the 'discipling movement' have tended to make discipleship a dirty word. In fact, perhaps because of this movement a whole family of words including 'accountability' and 'mentoring' often evoke negative feedback. However, if we swing to the other end of the pendulum, we would face a real risk that in avoiding the demonstrated problems of this movement, we lose sight of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18b-20a.

So what is a disciple? Putman observes that many churches 'don't agree on what a disciple is and they don't use the same language.' He continues, 'We want [the definition] to be in simple language so the whole church is able to remember it. We point our people to the definition of a disciple found in... Matthew 4:19. We believe that this invitation describes the definition of a disciple and that to follow Jesus will mean a life change at the head, heart, and hands level of our beings.' (p 26)

The discipleship process begins with church leaders. Leaders have a responsibility to evaluate their church members. To guide someone to spiritual maturity, we must first know where they stand in their walk with Christ. In the core of his book Putman describes attitudes and behaviours that help identify each of five stages

of a disciple's growth. He devotes a chapter to each stage: spiritually dead, spiritual infant, spiritual child, spiritual young adult and spiritual parent.

The benefit of characterising people in this way is that it provides insight into the next step they need to take. I know this kind of labeling sounds a bit clinical, but when I recently shared this material with a group of young men I meet with regularly, they were more than happy to label themselves. They appreciated the insight into the path ahead of them. They weren't all at the same stage, and the labels helped them to share a common framework and to encourage each other's spiritual growth.

After identifying stages of spiritual growth, Putman promotes a four step 'reproducible process' for maturing disciples appropriate to the needs of each stage. We *share* (Gospel, life, truth, new habits) with spiritually dead and infants. We *connect* spiritual children to God, a spiritual family (small group) and a new purpose. Spiritual young adults seek to serve, so we *equip* them and provide opportunities. The last step in the process is to release spiritual parents or disciple-makers by *explaining* the discipleship process, *apprenticing* them, and *supporting* them to disciple alone.

For example, if I'm investing in the growth of a spiritual child, I want to ensure they understand the value of spiritual disciplines in connecting with God. I also want to ensure that other Christians are making an effort to embrace this spiritual child. Finally, I want to lead this person to understand their role in God's kingdom. I don't want to just increase their knowledge, but ultimately influence their behaviour. This process may take several years in a new Christian, but it gives the individual and the church a common understanding of the spiritual goals and process.

Finally, it's worth highlighting that Putman's fifth stage is not *adult*, but *parent*. 'As Christians we are called to make disciples – to do our part to reproduce our faith in another. Adults are *able* to reproduce, but that does not mean they are reproducing.' (p 42) In contrast, spiritual parents make reproducing their faith a priority.

Putnam's book is an easy read. The much bigger challenge is implementing discipling relationships. To this end, I also highly recommend a related workbook for sharing these ideas with a small group: *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual*. ■