



101:

From Children's Ministry To Child Discipleship



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A Disciple Before a Director:

Your Primary Identity

“We need to talk.”

My (Sam) 21-year-old heart sank as my boss said these words to me just two months into my new position. Fresh out of Bible college, I had felt the call to be a youth pastor since I was 12 years old. A friend from college and I had been working to restart the youth ministry in our church, and I felt things were going really well.

I remember walking into the room, the only completely square room in the whole church. Light poured in from the windows directly in front of me, and dust danced in the beams as my stomach twisted. *What could I have done?*

My boss, who was also an elder in our church, sat me down. He kindly said, “I need you to oversee all the children’s ministry programs at our church.” I was filled with a mixture of relief and confusion. Grateful to still have a job, confused because when I was hired, the senior pastor had asked me to work with the youth. Which is what I had been doing. I replied, “I can definitely help out with kids ministry, wherever you need help.” “

My boss continued. “No, I’m not sure you understand. I need you to run every kids’ ministry program we have, not the youth group. You are in charge of all our programs from the midweek classes to Sunday morning kids’ church.”



I was stunned. I told him I was hired to be the youth pastor and would need time to think about what he had just said.

I went home early that day, devastated. I had just packed all my earthly belongings into a Dodge Neon and driven 3,000 miles away from home to start my dream job. I wanted to be a youth pastor. In the 1990s they were the cool pastors. The ones I'd looked up to. Children's pastors wore polyester, youth pastors wore acid-washed jeans. Children's pastors wore old sports coats, youth pastors wore jean jackets. (The '90s was a big decade for denim.) I told my wife, and she couldn't believe it, either. We later found out that when my senior pastor says, "youth," he means "children." When he says, "young people," he means "teenagers." I was tricked into a ministry through semantics.

I said a prayer that night that changed my life. "God, if this is what you have for me to do you need to give me a passion for children's ministry. I know I won't last unless you give me a burden to see kids come to love you and treasure you above all things." God answered that prayer. He gave me a vision and helped me see there is no ministry in the church more important than the discipleship of the next generation.

I went to bed as an aspiring youth pastor and woke up as a children's pastor. Not because my identity had changed, but because my mission did.

I learned something two months into ministry that would stick with me for 28 years in the same church. **I am called to follow Christ, not cling to my self-created identity. I find my significance in the label of disciple of Christ, not in the title of pastor.**

When we cling to titles over identification with Christ and His life, death and resurrection, we find ourselves validating our position through numbers and accomplishments rather than resting in and energetically working from the understanding we belong to God. I learned by grace my pastoral identity is not created by ministry titles or ministry success but by communion with Christ.

You are made in the image of Christ.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created



man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Someone once said man was made in the image of God and has been trying to return the favor ever since. How true is that? We are constantly trying to find our meaning in what we can make rather than in whose image we are made.

As pastors and leaders, we can easily slip into finding meaning from the wrong things, such as how many kids come to our midweek, weekend, VBS or outreach activities. Christlikeness is much harder to measure than how many kids came to our event. We can feel so forgotten in the church basement that we seek to be seen or push to be noticed by our leaders. The temptation to find meaning in our work and in the results of our efforts is always there.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

Paul says our meaning is found in Christ. We are created by Christ, for Christ and in Christ. Because that is true, our

identity is unshakable. When we place our identity in a temporary title or an uncertain outcome, we will lead from a place of insecurity and anxiety; we will always have to prove our worth and achieve significance.

When meaning is unshakably connected to our Maker, our mission is secure. We are free to do what He commands us to do because our identity is not tied to the outcome of our efforts.

Our significance is connected to our source.

Pastoring and leading is not who we are – it is what God by His grace has called us to do. Our meaning is found in whose we are, and our significance is found in how well we reflect the One who made us and all that is. When we strive to find our significance in earthly things, we get angry and anxious when someone takes those things from us. Rather, we should hold our position, title, location or responsibility with open hands as gifts and tools for God to use, not possessions to be grasped.

In the years I served as the child discipleship pastor, it was easy for me to take the change of direction or responsibilities personally. When I



didn't get affirmation from my pastor or leaders above me, I would try to find it in other equally shaky places, like in the approval and acceptance of the kids, their parents, or my fellow pastors. I looked horizontally for strength and footing that is only found in the vertical love of God that has come to me in the person and work of Christ. It was through the joys and pains of ministry I learned to relinquish my rights and give up what I felt I had earned. I had to remind myself I am not my own but I belong body and soul to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Our greatest title as a leader is "a follower of Jesus." When we find our significance in Someone who is unshakable, we are free to explore, free to fail because we are doing what we do from a place of unshakable love. We are ministering from the grace God supplies, rather than the fickle reality of our frail abilities.

Our calling is secure.

When you realize whose you are and what that means, you are free to model the mission of Christ. Jesus came as our perfect sacrifice but also to show us how to live and to model the call to make disciples. Jesus' last command to us must be our first priority in our lives

and ministry: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

We are created in the image of God and called to the work of God and empowered by the Spirit of God. What has He called us to do? To make disciples of all nations. To go in the power of the Spirit and do the work the Son modeled for us in this life. When this is our identity, it doesn't matter if we are wearing polyester or acid-washed jeans. We will have confidence in the mission and the One who commissioned us, not in our performance or outcomes or title.

We are loved, we are called and we are empowered by His Spirit to accomplish what He demands.

What we are called to do is the most important work in the universe. That isn't hyperbole, that is reality. There is nothing more important than making disciples of the next generation.



How do we minister differently in light of this reality?

1. Disciple-makers are first disciples themselves.

The primary reason most pastors and leaders don't disciple others is because no one disciplined them. We reproduce what we are, and we recreate what we are. Discipleship is not a program or a pill; it's a process. Eugene Peterson famously said it's a "long obedience in the same direction." Following Jesus requires us to be formed into His image and obey His laws and commands. Growth happens when we apply God's truth to the soil of our hearts over time. We must be committed to walking in the way of Jesus if we are ever to invite others to follow.

What you do isn't a job; it's a calling and a command. This is where the modern American church has gone awry. When we look at the discipleship of children as a job, we try to help them do what we think Christians ought to do. We get lost in numbers and find our worth in outcomes. Helping our kids become more like Jesus requires us knowing what that looks like or we will settle for church attendance and "niceness." Christianity is more than showing up with a smile. It's about transformation

into the kind of person who naturally does what Jesus did. The evidence you are obsessed with Jesus is in how your love for others and desire for children and youth to come to know, love and serve the Lord is in every aspect of your life.

This doesn't happen by accident. Following Jesus is a process choosing to lay aside things we think will make us significant and loving God and others as a necessary consequence.

2. Scripture is foundational – Know God's Voice

Scripture conditions our heart to recognize God's voice. Here again, Peterson has much to say about the language of the Bible. "Language, spoken and written, is the primary means for getting us in on what is, on what God is and is doing ... to deal with our souls, to form a life that is congruent with the world that God has created, the salvation that he has enacted, and the community that he has gathered."

The Bible is the oxygen our souls ache for living in the polluted air of self-interest and self-importance. We can't use the Bible as a tool for lesson building or storytelling. We must use the Bible to train our ears to hear what God's voice sounds like. We must turn



our hearts to the whisper of Scripture that tells us we are not our own and we are not alone.

The temptation in teaching the Bible to anyone, including kids, is to make it a textbook full of information rather than a story that produces something in us. Reading the Bible isn't passive; as disciples, we can't be satisfied just reading the Bible. **We must allow the Bible to read us, to shape us to be more like Jesus through allowing Scripture to reveal the areas of our lives that need the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.** Spending time in Scripture, reading and memorizing, isn't just us getting the Bible in us. Spiritual reading, reading to hear God's voice, gets us in on what God is doing. It invites us into the big story where every little story finds its meaning.

For us to be formed into the image of Christ, Scripture cannot be an accessory. It isn't another book among many. It is the foundation we build our teaching and our lives on, and set our hopes and dreams on. We do not drift into holiness or Christlikeness; we drift into lethargy and self-centeredness.

How do we let the Word invite us into its life.

- **We read slowly.** We don't read quickly as a task to accomplish but unhurriedly, allowing the words within the pages of His story to inform the realities of our own.
- **We read frequently.** The more you hear His voice the more familiar you will be with what God's voice sounds like when He speaks to you through His Word.
- **We read patiently.** It isn't always clear right away what the verse or story means. It takes the patience of reading and rereading and maybe seeking wisdom from others to understand what the verse means to them and what it means to us.
- **We read prayerfully.** Always begin your time reading the Bible by asking the Holy Spirit for illumination, to show you what you could not see on your own. And to show you Christ on the pages of the story.

If you are going to invite the kids you teach into the story of the gospel, beginning with creation, followed by



the fall, leading to redemption and final restoration, you must immerse yourself in the story. It cannot be a place you occasionally visit but a destination, a country in which you live and a home in which you dwell.

3. Prayer is formational – Listen to God’s voice

Prayer in the life of a leader can be the panic button we push when we run out of ideas, energy or hope. There were many times when I would avoid prayer not because I didn’t want to pray but because I had to make copies, I had to clean up from Trunk or Treat, or I needed to prep for small group. Prayer was something I got to once I was done with my work, rather than a formative practice that was making me into something that resembled a disciple.

I was doing the work of a manager and expecting disciples to be the end result of that work. It wasn’t until I saw myself as a disciple first and leader second that prayer became something formational rather than an obligation to fulfill.

If our disciplines are like breathing, then reading Scripture is inhalation and prayer is exhalation.

We breathe in Scripture, and we exhale prayers. Through His redemptive story and prayer, God forms our desires and conditions our hearts.

Prayer is not a ransom note of demands that God, if He is really God, must meet to earn our trust. Prayer is us learning how to listen to the voice of God the Bible has taught us to understand. Listening and responding to God transforms our desires and conditions our hearts to trust and obey.

How do practice prayer

- **Prayer is listening** – The starting place of prayer is not a 30-minute filibuster where you keep talking until the God of the universe cries uncle. The starting place of prayer is learning to listen to God’s voice.
- **Prayer is speaking** – Just because we approach God with humility and silence doesn’t mean we don’t ask; Jesus says asking is good. In Matthew 7:8-11, He instructs us to ask like a little child: For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then,



who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

Ask clearly and boldly in faith. Our kids already know this, but they need us to model it to them so they never outgrow it.

- **Prayer is trusting** – Prayer is a childlike trust that places all things in the eternally capable hands of the God who ordains all things for our good and His glory. We ask and keep asking, but at the same time we trust and keep on trusting. Paul Miller, in his classic work on prayer, says, “A praying life opens itself to an infinite, searching God. We can’t do that without releasing control, without constantly surrendering our will to God. ‘Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10) is actually scary.”

Before you are a director, you are a disciple; before your position on a church staff, consider your position in Him. You can lead the kids and families in your care to the places you have been led. Discipleship is the product of someone who has committed themselves to a long obedience in

the same direction – a heart that has been trained to trust and conditioned to obey.

A Prayer for Those Who Disciple the Next Generation

God who calls the young before they can name You,
grant us grace for this work.

When our words are few,
let them be faithful.
When our strength fades,
let love endure.

Keep us attentive to quiet growth
and patient with unseen fruit.
Remind us that this work is Yours
before it is ever ours.

May we walk each day,
In trust in Your word and
Obedience to Your voice.

We offer You our presence,
our faithfulness,
and our hope.

Amen.

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In *Child's Ministry to Child Discipleship*, Sam and Jenny walk child discipleship leaders through the practical, day-to-day realities of ministry equipped with the lens of child discipleship. They help leaders see that everything from personal growth, check-ins, special needs ministry, large events, and volunteer recruitment and training all serve the larger goal of discipling the next generation.

At the center of every topic is the Gospel. Every effort points toward the formation of the next generation through the intentional work of loving, caring adults, scriptural faithfulness, and ministry practices that, by God's grace, produce Christlikeness in children.

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