

Discipleship in Disability

Following Jesus

What is a Disciple? In first-century Judaism, a disciple was a student of a rabbi. The disciples went where the rabbi went, walked like the rabbi walked, and learned to speak and teach as the rabbi spoke and taught. Jesus called his earliest disciples to leave what they were doing and follow him. For the duration of Jesus' earthly ministry, his disciples traveled with him, sat under his teaching, and learned to do as he did. Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:12, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." The Great Commission calls all Christians to "go make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Disciples make disciples.

Differences in the Body of Christ While we are all called to be like Christ, Jesus is not asking all Christians to be the same! We can celebrate what makes each of us a unique and an essential part of the body of Christ.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (1 Corinthians 12:12-15, NIV).

All disciples are "baptized into one body," but not all disciples are identical. The church is designed to include all ethnicities, socio-economic strata, giftings, abilities, and disabilities. People with disabilities—physical, developmental, and intellectual—are called into the same body of Christ as the most physically and intellectually gifted among us.

Someone without the use of their arms or legs can be called as a missionary to the farthest ends of the earth. Someone with a speech impediment can be called to speak the words of God. Moses' life proves it. Could someone who is blind be gifted to see the needs of their neighbors better than their friends with 20/20 vision? Yes, of course!

If we believe that people with disabilities have been called by Christ to follow him, then it is imperative that we understand how to disciple them.

(Over)

1. Coming to Christ

Discipling people with disabilities means sharing the Good News with them. This requires a church that is physically and socially accessible to people with disabilities. A staircase is a physical barrier that keeps someone in a wheelchair from accessing the gospel. The assumption that someone with an intellectual disability “just doesn’t get anything out of the sermon” might be an invisible barrier. Making the gospel accessible to *everyone* is the first step to making disciples. Things like wheelchair accessibility, sign-language interpreters, and one-on-one buddies all exist to assist with communicating the gospel.

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:14, 17, CSB).

Discipleship begins, of course, by coming to Christ!

2. Growing in Christ

When we receive Christ, we also receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will convict us of sin (John 16:8), teach us (John 14:26), give us gifts for the sake of ministry (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), and unite us one to another (Ephesians 4:3-7).

Discipleship includes the same elements for people with disabilities. What we must consider is what barriers keep people with disabilities from the discipleship process.

If you can’t get to church, you can’t be discipled by that church. If you can’t understand the gospel as it’s preached by the church, you can’t be discipled by that church. If you can get to church and understand the teaching, but are surrounded by people who don’t believe that you have a vital, Spirit-filled role to play within the church, you will not be able to grow in your service for God. The church is God’s chosen vehicle for discipleship and has been tasked with making disciples, including disciples who are disabled.

3. Helping Share Christ with Others

Because disciples are called to a community of believers, the gifts of the Spirit are discovered in the context of community. As believers with disabilities participate in community, their gifts will be discovered. A church that starts with the assumption that people with disabilities have spiritual gifts will be able to discover those gifts and help them find a suitable place of service.

Disciples make disciples! A church that is going to disciple people with disabilities will also actively seek ways for those they disciple to disciple others.