

# ***Delivering Congregational Discipleship***

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James Yoder

John 10:11-18 says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.*

*"I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."*

A principal of an all-boys high school invited recruit members from three respective divisions of the military to participate in a forty-five-minute assembly where each representative had the opportunity to make a presentation to the students. The three divisions invited were from the Army, the Navy, and the Marines. They were told the assembly would last forty-five minutes; thus each person would have fifteen minutes to represent their division, followed by a time for the boys to personally interact with the recruiters at their respective tables. He stated emphatically they were on a tight schedule and that the meeting could not last more than forty-five minutes.

The first member to speak represented the Army. He gave ample reasons why the boys

should consider joining the Army. He wasn't quite finished with his presentation in his allotted time, so he "borrowed" several minutes from the other two men. By the time the next recruit started speaking, an extra five minutes had elapsed.

The second recruit from the Navy quickly began to frame a case and tell the boys why they should join the Navy. However, he also needed a few extra minutes to finish his presentation, and he also borrowed some time from the last recruiter.

The third and final member represented the Marines. But rather than rushing into his speech, he paused in front of the boys and began scanning the audience. Several minutes elapsed as he walked back and forth across the stage scanning each row of boys.

Those in the audience were perplexed why he wouldn't use the remaining five minutes to state his case. Finally, he crossed his arms, and with a bit of a smirk on his face, he walked over to the microphone and told the young men, "From what I can tell, there are only about two or three of you boys that would ever make it in the Marines. I want to see you boys at my table after the meeting!" And with those words he sat down.

Well, you can imagine the number of boys that gathered around his table to inquire whether they would qualify. Obviously, the last recruiter struck a compelling chord with a speech that lasted less than thirty seconds.

And while this illustration does not convey all that transpires when discipleship happens, it carries an important point for pastors. Our message must compel others to action! And

when I say message, I'm not only referencing to the times we stand behind the pulpit on Sunday mornings to preach, although that is certainly included. Rather I'm talking about a holistic life message that compels and motivates others to live, think, and act like Christ. The question we must ask ourselves is whether our life message bears witness of Christ. Furthermore, how are we delivering that message?

If we look beyond our text a few verses, we will note there was a division among the Jews. Some were persuaded that Jesus was a mad demoniac. Others reasoned that it would be impossible for one possessed by Satan to open the eyes of the blind. And so they insistently asked, "How long do you keep us in suspense, in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Why did they want to know?

Were they interested in becoming disciples of Christ? I would sadly propose that was not the reason or the motive behind the question. I suppose they thought if they could get Jesus to confess and declare equality with Jehovah God, they would have the right or liberty to stone Him to death. But listen to Jesus' response in verses 25 and 26: *"I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you."*

The phrase "bear witness," in Greek *martureo* (*mar-too-reh-o*) has the idea to testify, or have a good, honest report. In other words, Jesus was saying, "The works that I do give a good, honest report of who I am!"

By the way, what started this dialogue between Jesus and the Jews? Was it not generated in chapter 9 when Jesus healed the blind man? In essence, His work of healing generated the conversation. So the question I propose to you, and what I must ask myself, is whether my life bears witness of Christ. Does it give a good,

honest report? Can I say like Paul, "Follow me as I follow Christ"?

Let's look a bit further at verse 27. Jesus said, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me!"* This is discipleship! Don't we want people who follow Christ—Christ followers who hear the voice of Jesus, who think, act, and reason like Him? That's what I want, and I'm confident any pastors present would want to deliver this kind of discipleship.

### ***Accountability Versus Discipleship***

Back in the early- to mid-90s, there was a strong voice in the Christian community for accountability. Promise Keepers and like-minded ministries broadly promoted brothers being accountable to brothers. Even though I was personally involved in various accountability groups throughout the years, there was always a niggling sense that we weren't fully covering the bases.

In retrospect, I question whether we accomplished our goal or reached the desired results. And I know I'm painting with a very broad brush, so please understand as we decipher this thought.

I'm certainly not indicating that there weren't those who were helped through accountability groups. There may well have been those who found significant help. But I've since discovered that accountability is only one component of discipleship. In other words, accountability is a *means*, not the *end!*

The gap that I witnessed repeatedly was expending a lot of energy to check in with my brother to see whether he was faithful to the commitments he made, whether that was concerning moral issues, marital faithfulness, financial accountability, or whatever the issue may have been. But what I experienced more often than not were some levels of victories, but usually repeated failures—almost as if the

conscience was appeased by admitting failure. Listen, if we stop short with only admitted failure without changing the heart, then we've really missed the goal!

Think about the relationship between the sheep and the Shepherd. Can you imagine one of the sheep jumping the fence of the sheepfold and then coming to Jesus later that week and say, "Jesus, I was baaaaad! I jumped the fence." Do you think Jesus' response would have been, "Well, thank you for being honest! I remember your commitment to not jump the fence, but I really appreciate your honesty! Sheep, you must think differently and stay within the boundaries. Hey, can I just pray for you?" Would He stop with that kind of accountability?

We must be bold and courageous enough to guide our brothers into truth. We dare not stop short by just admitting failure without guiding them into changed hearts. Admitting failure is a great step forward. In fact, we must admit failure before we can fix the problem. However, too often we fail to lead them into freedom. We must take the time to teach them how to remain in victory! It is possible to REMAIN in victory, hallelujah! 1 Corinthians 15:57 says, *"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"* Discipleship brings a whole new dimension to accountability. It is more than simply coming together every week to admit failures. It's about learning to live in victory.

Eighteen to twenty years ago, I taught the book of Ephesians at one of our youth Bible schools. I had approximately 40 students in my class. There is a repeated theme in Ephesians which promotes living *En Christo*—in Christ. Numerous times the phrase or a variation of that phrase is used. As I was giving the introduction, I asked the class on the spur of the moment how many of them struggle with the assurance of salvation. I was shocked to see that close to 75-80% of the students raised their hands.

Now these were not youth that had come off the streets with no previous religious influence. Rather, many of them were raised having attended church services Sunday morning and evening, Wednesday evening, Sunday School, Christian day school, family devotions (hopefully), summer Bible school, and yet many struggled at a basic level with the assurance of salvation.

Salvation is a foundational doctrine, and if we struggle at that level, we are nowhere ready to defend our faith through apologetics. Something is definitely wrong if more energy is spent assuring them of their faith than calling them to maturity. Have we erred though a lack of discipleship?

An alternative to accountability, and something that some of us may be more familiar with, is the art of fence building. Allow me to qualify what I'm going to say. Lest you think that I'm against any sort of fence--I'm not! In fact, I would propose to you that fence building was first instigated by God. If we go back in our text to verse 7, Jesus said, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep."* If there is a door, there is obviously a structure that requires me to pass through the door in order for me to get from one place to the next. What good would a door do by itself? In other words, we don't set up a door in the middle of a room. A door is always placed in a wall where there is a perimeter or structure.

In verse 9, Jesus basically says the same thing: *"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."* If we go in and out, it's because there is a structure that hinders me from transitioning from point A to point B. There must be a perimeter of some sort.

I would suggest, then, that Jesus is not without fences. We live in an age when fences are declared narrow, legalistic, prejudiced, judgmental, intolerant, traditionalist, and the list

goes on and on. I'm sure you've noticed that many of these voices come from within the Christian community and are possibly not so far removed from our own personal culture.

The problem with fences, however, is becoming fence-dependent to keep the sheep within the fold. I have observed that those who are under the care of restrictive and fence-dependent leaders tend not to think for themselves or develop deep, personal convictions. Typically, they have been programmed to do as they are told and believe what they've been told to believe. Sadly, when they are placed in an environment where there are fewer restrictions or parameters, they lack discernment, often assuming that anything is permissible.

Many times they look around to see what others are doing or wearing or what activities the next person is involved in, comparing themselves with others rather than asking God for direction. Fence-dependent individuals tend to build convictions horizontally rather than vertically.

Once I visited my good friend, who at that time was a modern-day shepherd. As we were walking around his farm, he began to tell me several observations he made during his sheep-tending years. He told me, "I don't have time to sit with my sheep day in and day out because I'm too busy with other farm work. Rather, I resort to fences to keep my sheep in the pasture. Furthermore," he continued, "when they find a loophole and slip through the fence, I just go and patch the fence so they won't do it again. If they jump over the fence, I just build it higher. If they slip below the fence, I make sure to lower the fence so they won't escape again. However," he said with a bit of lament, "the trouble is they don't know my voice and don't come at my call. The bottom line is--they don't know me!"

Friends, I propose the solution is not to get rid of all the fences. We've seen entire conferences and congregations go astray because they've removed all the boundaries. That's not a viable

solution. The solution is to pursue matters of the heart as relationships are built! If we were to expend the same amount of energy on building relationships as we do building fences, I wonder where it would take us.

### ***Blending principles***

I'm suggesting that one error is to focus solely on relationships while issues of truth are overlooked, which frequently transpired during the accountability era. The other ditch, which may be more familiar to us, is to so sharpen our fence-building skills that we miss the heart of the sheep.

What if we blend relationship and truth as two complimentary principles rather than philosophies that are pitted against each other? Discipleship does not err on the side of relationship nor on the side of truth. Consider the following passages:

- Psalm 85:10 "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed."
- Psalm 25:10 "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, to such as keep His covenant and His testimonies."
- Psalm 61:7 "He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him!"
- Psalm 86:15 "But You, O God, are a God full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth."
- Psalm 89:14 "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before your face."

The New Testament changes it up a bit:

- John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

- John 1:17 *“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

Need I say more? Friends, I wonder whether we can fully comprehend how impacting it would be if we develop the art of blending these two principles as a means to **deliver congregational discipleship**.

## ***Discipleship***

Jesus identifies three things the Good Shepherd does that cause sheep to follow the Shepherd. In other words, it may be indicative of how Jesus would **deliver congregational discipleship**.

### ***1. He gives His life for the sheep.***

v. 11 *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **gives His life** for the sheep.”*

Fellow pastors, discipleship comes with a price tag. Much of the time it’s hard, dirty work. It requires time, energy, and involvement, particularly on the part of pastors. Frequently it calls for us to give up our own personal agendas to disciple our brothers. I tend to be motivated when I can cross off an item from my to-do list, yet discipleship tends to be an interminable process because sanctification is a continuing development. Jesus recognizes that the Shepherd *“gives His life”* for the sheep.

In Philippians 2:17, the Apostle Paul said it this way: *“Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.”* If you want an inkling of the hardships Paul referenced during his pastorate, you can read about it in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. He then wraps up by saying, *“Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.”* I think as pastors, most of us can identify with Paul regarding the “constant weight of concern for our congregations.” But a *“good*

*shepherd will lay down his life”* for those in his care.

I’m concerned that I don’t leave you with a daunting depiction of pastoral duties. Therefore, I’d like to list some steps of action that may help break down discipleship responsibilities to manageable proportions.

### ***a. Distribute responsibilities***

One of the actions we have taken in our congregation is to distribute clerical responsibilities among each of the pastors. In other words, my co-pastors are commissioned to carry out pastoral duties that have traditionally been given only to the bishop or overseer. Their charge allows them to marry couples, conduct funerals, baptize, serve and lead out in communion services, or give leadership in things that in the past were only done by one individual. We share that load. By the way, I’m hearing of more and more congregations that are taking a similar approach.

I don’t find any Scriptural basis for one person to shoulder all these duties alone. In fact, can I be so bold as to suggest that the structure of one person carrying out these responsibilities potentially fosters a top-down mentality that is unbiblical in nature? I find Paul instructing Titus to *“ordain elders (plural) in every city.”* If I understand these terms correctly, the words “elder,” “bishop,” and “overseer” are derived from the same Greek word. If this is true, then they may have had numerous bishops in one congregation. Having two or three bishops or overseers in one congregation might sound a bit foreign to us, but it’s likely the format of the Early Church. (I might add that this structure still calls for one person to be designated to take the lead role within the ministry team.)

This model allows pastoral responsibilities to be distributed among the ministry team. The bulk of responsibility does not rest on one person. This structure also allows the diversity of gifts and

personalities frequently found in a plural ministry to connect more closely with various individuals in the congregation. Consequently, as these relationships develop, it would seem prudent for that minister to be involved personally in various duties needing to be performed, such as baptism or marriage. It's another way to foster healthy discipleship.

***b. Give attention to gifts within the team and congregation***

Secondly, we should give attention to gifts within the pastoral team and the congregation. Traditionally our conservative Anabaptist churches have shied away from placing too much emphasis on the gifts within the Body of Christ. This theme is repeated several times in the Epistles, and I believe it calls for our attention as well.

We have a lay brother who is a number cruncher and is extremely gifted analytically. Interestingly, he has a reading disorder. It's not that he can't read, but it is more difficult for him than for others. However, several years ago he was elected to lead our finance committee. Both of our deacons sit on that committee as well, but this brother gives primary leadership to that ministry. I have been amazed--and impressed, I might add--at the level of organization he brought to the table. I typically don't attend these meetings but am simply given a copy of the minutes and periodic financial reports. This has freed me to focus on other pastoral responsibilities. I was also impressed that this brother had the insight to mentor and train a younger man in this capacity in case something was to happen to one of the senior members of the committee. That's discipleship!

Another example is a brother who is gifted in leading the congregation during our time of singing and sharing that takes place between Sunday School and the message. This time has developed into a ministry equal to Sunday School by having people share what God is

doing in their lives. There have been times of confessing struggles, sharing hopes and requests for prayer, followed by brothers and sisters gathering around these individuals for prayer. It models for our children how the church should truly function. The brother who leads this time is gifted in fostering robust singing and in promoting transparency.

We've also shifted how we fill the role of youth sponsors. The previous two couples led our youth for nearly ten years. Currently we have two couples that volunteered for this responsibility, and with the approval of the body, have now been engaged in that role for over four years. Having long-term leaders has developed relationships and confidence among the youth that typically doesn't happen in a one- or two-year commitment. It lends itself to the opportunity for greater discipleship.

I was first introduced to the concept of long-term discipleship when our family committed to go on the mission field for a two-year term. The very first conversation I had with a native person transpired as we were unloading our truck soon after our arrival. Susan, a local native person, had stopped by to meet the new missionaries. Not long after introductions were made, she asked rather bluntly how long we intend to stay in the area. I replied we were committed for two years. She then responded, "Well, there is no use getting close to you. As soon as we get to know someone and make friends, they up and leave!" I stood there speechless! And in a moment's time it occurred to me how well developed I would be if a foreign mission sent a new missionary to my congregation every two years. How well would I have grown in that environment? How much trust and confidence would I have placed in the new couple? And how quickly would that have happened? Discipleship takes time, but perhaps more importantly, it takes trust.

That experience reshaped a lot of my views, and from it developed a simple philosophy. Tapping

in and utilizing gifts within the congregation is a way to call out brothers to the work. I now measure success not by how much I accomplish as a pastor, but rather how much I can get others to accomplish. Success is multiplied by the number of people involved.

## **2. He knows His Sheep**

v. 14 *“I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.”*

If you want to **deliver congregational discipleship**, you must know your sheep! We had a situation less than two weeks ago where our entire pastoral team sat across the living room from a young man in our youth group who made some poor life choices. We had been aware he was struggling and had actually appointed one of the pastors to keep checking in with him. However, we were all clueless to the extent of hardness that had enveloped his heart. I’m sorry to admit that I didn’t know him! I thought I did, but I’m saddened to admit that I truly didn’t. It is important for us to know our sheep.

Larry Crabb, in his book *Connecting*, states that after years of being involved in a counselling ministry, he has determined that 90-95% of the cases coming to his office could be, and should be, dealt with on a congregational level. Interesting! We live in an era when technological commodities have reached an apex compared to anything in the past. Logic would tell us we have more opportunity to communicate at a heart level than ever before, yet many of our counselling centers are booked further in advance than ever. Why? What’s happening?

I propose two things for you to consider:

### **a. Discipleship takes time**

Discipleship takes time...and a LOT of time!  
Disciples are not developed overnight.  
Significant amounts of time can be poured into

individuals or groups of people, yet sometimes they jump fence or don’t heed the instruction given to them. My tendency is to focus on the fence that needs to be mended. There’s a false notion that tells me if I can fix the fence, I can fix the heart! Genuine care doesn’t ignore behavior, but rather uses aberrant behavior to alert us to a heart that is straying from God. That heart is what ultimately needs to be pursued.

### **b. Discipleship takes perseverance**

Did I mention that discipleship can get really, really messy at times? I recall going with my dad to the job site as a young lad and purposely smudging my face and arms with dirt to give the appearance that I was really working hard. I’ve noticed, however, when working with people, I can get really “smudged up” without trying. At times I wonder how I got myself in the present predicament. And to be very honest, sometimes I’m tempted with the thought to check out!

Paul exhorts us in Galatians 6:9, *“To not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.”* Allow me to draw your attention back to our text in verse 12: *“But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.”*

What happens in a congregational setting when a shepherd leaves and flees? By the way, allow me to remind you, it’s possible to leave and flee without relocating geographically or transferring your membership to another body. Checking out mentally or emotionally will cause a shepherd to disconnect from the flock, making them vulnerable to the wolf. Since hirelings are in it for themselves, they will expend little energy for the flock. A good shepherd will stay engaged because he knows the tendency of the wolf. A hireling will also lord his authority over the flock rather than serve them, which typically lends itself to a scattering as well. Shepherds are called to serve which requires perseverance.

### 3. *Discipleship takes self-sacrifice*

John 10:15 says, “*As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.*”

Discipleship is choosing to take the high road, yet if we choose this path, it is likely we will absorb some pretty hard hits. Some blows are more difficult to take than others. Most likely you’ve experienced unwarranted hits, which can really hurt. Everything in you wants to defend yourself! But a good shepherd will choose to take the hit for the sheep. The Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, exemplified this for us.

A good shepherd will pursue those in His care. He will go out of his way to cover his brother’s back. Our youth must see adult believers doing real church if we desire sustainability.

- A real church will rally around bleeding hearts with prayer and supplication for the wounded. We will be less concerned about protecting an image, instead creating opportunities for members to rally around each other in prayer.
- A real church will commit to weather the storm rather than fragment into hurting pockets of struggling survivors. The Anabaptist history does not have a good track record of resolving differences productively. We say we’re nonresistant, yet we continue to fragment in many directions. We need a fresh resolve to lay down our lives for our brothers!
- A real church will create an environment that is safe! Safe to express what I’m feeling, while knowing my dirty laundry will not cause me to be rejected.
- A real church will care enough to teach line upon line and precept upon precept with relevancy. Messages can be truth based, yet if it does not connect with the

heart, we have not fully utilized the power of the Gospel.

- A real church will utilize the keys of the Kingdom to storm the gates of hell, knowing it will not be able to withstand the force of the Church. This kind of witness will draw our youth to church life rather than drive them away. I sincerely believe our congregations are filled with people and youth that want to experience real church.

I leave you with a final call. As a fellow under-shepherd, I call you to the noble work of discipleship. Be a shepherd to those under your care!

James Yoder  
Nappanee, IN