

# discipleship matters

WE ARE  
DISCIPLES.

WE ARE  
DISCIPLE-MAKERS.

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## Discipling by Design

BY KATHY HOLKEBOER

"Lord, what am I supposed to do with Josephine?" I prayed. "She's so sweet and so eager to please. But I don't know how to teach her to apply principles from your Word."

The Lord seemed to be saying to me that I should communicate spiritual truth to Josephine with her particular learning style in mind. The Learning Style Inventory I was familiar with defined four basic styles.

### Concrete Experiencers

The "Carols" I've known are delightful. They love people. They use their feelings and the opinions of others to make decisions. Grasping theoretical principles behind a concept is usually difficult. They learn best from being involved in specific examples, and they learn from each other better than from an authority.

When Josephine, a "Carol," asked me to study the Bible with her, I knew that giving her the task of identifying basic scriptural principles in a passage would be outside her best method of learning. So when I tried to teach her what Scripture says about gossip, I used a "finish the story" approach.

After writing her end to the story, I asked her to check it against Proverbs 16:28 and Proverbs 17:9. The method worked. After finishing the assignment, she related a situation at work where she had misinterpreted someone's comment and passed it on as truth.

Concrete Experience learners need real examples to understand scriptural principles, and studying the lives of biblical characters provides excellent examples for them. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is an example of how Jesus communicated

spiritual truth to empathetic, people-oriented learners.

### Active Experimenters

Another learner with slightly less people orientation is "Alex," the Active Experimenter. They typically learn by doing.

An "Alex" also seems to learn well if he can verbalize his thoughts in a small-group discussion or if he is allowed the freedom to work on a project. Basically, he will learn best



FINDING THE RIGHT LEARNING STYLE IS A KEY FACTOR IN DISCIPLING SOMEONE WELL.

in an active, hands-on situation. Being part "Alex" myself, I know what it's like to listen intently to lectures but not clearly understand the concepts until I've done the homework. I have a hard time gaining much spiritual input from listening to sermons. But when I explain the content to someone else, it becomes clear to me.

"Alex" would have relished the opportunity Jesus gave the seventy-two evangelists in Luke 10:1-17. Jesus sent them out two by two to announce that he was coming.

How would an Active Experimenter learn scriptural principles about gossip? Preparing to lead a Bible study on gossip would probably help him most, as he would discover



"Then Jesus went again to walk alongside the lake. Again a crowd came to him, and he taught them. Strolling along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, at his work collecting taxes. Jesus said, 'Come along with me.' He came.

"Later Jesus and his disciples were at home having supper with a collection of disreputable guests. Unlikely as it seems, more than a few of them had become followers. The religion scholars and Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company and lit into his disciples: 'What kind of example is this, acting cozy with the misfits?'

"Jesus, overhearing, shot back, 'Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit.'"

**Mark 2:13-17 (THE MESSAGE)**

the principles himself during this hands-on activity.

### **Abstract Conceptualizers**

"Andrea," the Abstract Conceptualizer, learns well when someone in authority has directed the learning. If there is something to analyze or a theory to comprehend, she's eager to learn it.

I knew a high-school-aged "Andrea" who had to know the why behind everything. On one occasion, another student told Andrea she was wrong about a biblical interpretation, even though the other student couldn't explain why. I sent them both home with an assignment to read several chapters in Romans. After Andrea systematically analyzed God's authoritative Word, she commented, "That wasn't fair; you picked the passages to support Liz's view." She didn't want to admit her theories didn't line up with Scripture, but she faced the truth after careful, analytical, systematic investigation.

An "Andrea" usually forms firm opinions, with or without expressing them. To gain God's perspective on the topic of gossip, she could do a verse-by-verse study that would reveal God's view on the subject. However, the instruction to do the study should leave room for "Andrea" to develop her own creative approach to the topic.

The Pharisees in Matthew 19 may have been learners like "Andrea." They wanted to learn in authority-directed, systematic packages. Since their opinions were well established, Jesus knew that he would have to quote their authority, Moses, in order to be heard.

### **Reflective Observers**

Reflective "Ralph" prefers a lecture so that he can take the role of impartial, objective observer. Reflective Observers are usually introverts. Since they rely heavily on careful observations to make judgments, we shouldn't expect them to be quick to respond.

I asked one "Ralph" why she didn't seem to be growing spiritually. "I don't know," she said. "So, does that mean you don't care?" I countered. "I don't know," she said again.

I was an Active Experimenter trying to disciple a Reflective Observer. I was asking for an immediate, spontaneous response from someone who needed time to think before

she could adequately respond. In this particular situation, time proved extremely important. When she was ready to let God begin working in her life, she asked me for tapes of a speaker we had heard at a conference two-and-a-half years before.

Reflective Observers benefit from small-group Bible study when homework is required. Doing the Bible study before they come to the meeting gives them time to think. At the meeting it's important to let them sit quietly. They learn as they listen and will probably make significant contributions if not pushed.

Probably the best way for "Ralph" to gain God's perspective on gossip would be to assign him to take notes on a lecture about gossip. The more respected the speaker, the greater the impact.

Jesus used the lecture method frequently, most notably in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

## ***A Combination of Styles***

Perhaps thorough learning requires equal amounts of all four styles, but each of us tends to learn best in a unique blend of one or more of these styles. Whether or not we minister in a church setting, God will place people in our paths who want to learn. We need to know them well enough to provide a learning environment best suited to each one.

Over a period of many months, Josephine eagerly did the Bible study homework I had designed specifically for her and became active in many church activities, including the social committee.

One Mother's Day, she expressed her appreciation to women in the church who had been "mothers" to her. I was encouraged to hear my name mentioned. I'm convinced my relationship with her would have been entirely different had I not disciplined her according to her unique learning style.

## **The Ministry of Hanging Around**

BY CLARK COTHERN

Chili, cheese, and potato chip dinners didn't fall neatly into my list of things to do under the heading "discipleship activities." They just happened, spontaneously, after church, as we

noticed five or six college students standing around looking like they wished someone would ask them to do something.

My wife, Joy, the consummate administrator, seized the moment and said, "Dave, you and Jocelyn bring the chips. Mark, grab some chili. Vicki, get a bag of that pre-shredded cheese, and grab some of these stray students. Meet us at our house in 20 minutes."

Can you honestly imagine a college student refusing such a proposal? Me neither.

What happened after the chili arrived could easily be described as discipleship, although no small-group activity was planned, and no inductive Bible study prepared.

What took place in our living room sounds a lot like what happened when Jesus "hung around" with some young men who became totally committed to following him. In fact, it seems many significant "teachable moments" took place in social settings and were all part of Jesus' "as you go" ministry.

## ***Life Decisions***

The informal "What are you going to do when you grow up?" discussions that followed the chili eating amazed us. Some knew exactly what they wanted to do and be when they "grew up." Others floundered as they wondered where they would fit.

I noticed that they hung on every word as Joy told her story about working through a process of growth. She described the many steps leading to her ministry to coworkers in the high-rise buildings she had managed. She also described the death to self needed to change roles from building manager to full-time mom and pastor's wife.

The students were less anxious about needing to know their future right away when they learned they could trust God for each step. Joy's personal life history helped them see a flesh-and-blood application of Scripture.

## ***Practical Help***

These kids were smart, though at times we had to remind them where they put their car keys. They would soak up knowledge almost as quickly as they soaked up chili.

In addition to the "What are you going to do when you grow up?" discussions, we found ourselves in the middle of several "How did you deal with (fill in the blank)?" discussions.

These life application questions allowed my wife and me to plant some powerful little seeds of faith.

For example, one young man asked me, “How do you deal with a girl who doesn’t love you as much as you love her?” His need for wise advice turned into one of the most meaningful discipleship opportunities I’ve encountered. If we had held a Bible study and this young man showed up, chances are he would have missed most of the study because his mind would have been preoccupied with that girl. But since I listened to his immediate problem, I was able to help him apply God’s Word in a practical area of his life. He began to see God as someone who cared about him right where he was living.

That reminds me of Jesus’ patient answers to disciples’ questions when they were just “hanging out” together. In fact, some of our most valuable lessons from the Master came from the teachable moments created by his disciples’ personal needs.

## The Remarkable Results

The results of such “hanging out” ministries still amaze me. One young woman quit sleeping around. She discovered that her self-worth came from what God thought about her and not what the latest male attention-giver thought.

Another woman quit dating a man who was not as spiritually mature as she was. She made a tough decision but chose to wait for someone who was more “equally yoked.”

Two couples are now pursuing careers centered around discipling others. Their

values shifted drastically during those informal discipleship events.

Whether it was for chili and cheese, chocolate chip cookies, or just a gallon of ice cream, the “hanging around” ministry times have proven to be some of the most meaningful and productive we’ve had. It’s true: People need to read the living Word before they will take seriously the written Word. All the studies of the Bible we’ve had



LIVING OUT GOD’S WORD IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS STUDYING GOD’S WORD.

with our friends were very important to the discipling process; yet, without the “hanging around” times, I’m convinced the studies would not have yielded such positive results.

We still plan, promote, and participate in group Bible studies, and we intentionally move toward certain discipleship goals. However, we also look for the “hanging around” ministry that is needed to put the icing on the cake. Or, in our case, the cheese on the chili.

*For a guide to leading small-group discussion and a list of other helpful resources, visit [www.tyndale.com/discipleshipresources](http://www.tyndale.com/discipleshipresources).*



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