

# **Guest editorial: Three commitments of biblical discipleship**

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One of our house church shepherds told me after the Sunday service: “Pastor Paul, ‘The safest place in our spiritual life is not a castle but the frontline.’ I will always remember that.”

My wife told me: “Honey, your sermon today left me no choice but to return to my house church. If David in his isolation was an easy prey to Satan, how much easier prey could I be without my house church family, even though they annoy me a lot?”

It was God’s encouragement to me last Sunday after I preached the fall of David recorded in 2 Samuel 11:1-5.

## **Three commitments of biblical discipleship**

I lost four lay leaders last week. That never happened in our church history. We are a new church in Plano, planted seven and a half years ago.

One couple stepped down from being shepherds of a house church, and the other couple decided to leave the church after struggling with their co-shepherd. It was a painful week to me, not because I lost good leaders, but they lost the vision of biblical discipleship.

Biblical discipleship is the main reason I decided to be a Baptist. I was converted from Buddhism at age 17 in Caracas, Venezuela, through a

Korean Southern Baptist missionary who discipled me. During college, I took a history class on American evangelicals and learned and loved the Baptist commitment to evangelism and discipleship.

I am a proud Baptist, committed to the Great Commission. My pastoral journey means my growing understanding of biblical discipleship. At least three convictions shaped my view of what it means to be a pastor faithful in disciple making.

## **1. Small group ministry**

First, discipleship requires a small-group ministry along with classes with good biblical content.

I worked hard to build a church balanced in Sunday school and church training programs. As a competent Southern Baptist in the early 1990s, I taught and established discipleship classes like Experiencing God, Master Life, Master Builder, Mind of Christ and Survival Kit I and II. Our adult spiritual formation curriculum was smooth and successful like a machine, until I went on my first mission trip to China.

In the winter of 1993, I taught 200 Korean Chinese pastors of underground house churches at a clandestine country town. While their biblical and theological knowledge was bare minimum, their Christian ethical integrity was more than impressive.

I wondered how they could live out their faith so consistently. One sociological factor was they all lived in a small, rural village where everyone knew everything about everyone. Transparency was the key component in their life, which came from their small community setting.

That discovery reinforced what I was learning from *The House Church* by Del Birkey. After the trip, I replaced Sunday school classes with cell

groups, and our adult discipleship experience became fuller with the fruits of life sharing.

If church training is theory learned in classrooms, small-group sharing provides a practicum for obedience and accountability.

## **2. Evangelism**

Second, discipleship needs evangelism.

As a pastor of a new church plant, I thought I had both experience and knowledge to lead my church. Once again, I established cell groups along with our discipleship classes called “Good Shepherd College.” The reason we study the Bible is to become shepherds.

We were growing steadily in numbers for the first three years and moved from surviving to stable. Then my second daughter, a freshman in college, told me how her small-group experience was transformative. The key difference was its evangelistic focus.

My daughter’s college house church was intentional and geared toward reaching out to VIPs. In comparison, my church had only a handful of converts while doubling its attendance.

After attending a week-long conference on house church ministry conducted by my daughter’s church in Houston, I found the missing ingredient for our small-group ministry.

We switched from cell groups to house churches four years ago. We made a list of VIPs with our unbelieving friends, coworkers and neighbors.

During the two years of the pandemic and Zoom meetings, our seven house churches grew to 15, while reaching out to several VIPs who are now participating in our weekly activities. We had two VIPs baptized for the first

time last Thanksgiving Sunday.

### 3. Prayer

Third, discipleship will succeed only with prayer.

Just as the Book of Acts showed how radically the disciples of Jesus lived before and after the coming of the Holy Spirit and the revival of their prayer life, discipleship will not advance unless the shepherd feels agony.

Apostle Paul confessed to the Ephesian elders, “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears” (Acts 20:31).

Our Lord did not just teach his disciples; he prayed for them until the last hour (Luke 22:32).

Our two shepherd couples left their frontline, because they did not see the promise of Immanuel in our Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). They were burned out, because they were not burning the oils of prayer.

I am deeply pained by their departure and my spiritual negligence. I am determined to labor again for the Lord’s promise of making disciples with him to the end.

Biblical discipleship is not for the fainthearted and soft souls. Following Jesus is never easy and even impossible unless I fight on my knees.

The safest place in life is the frontline of failures and repentance, not the castle of religious consumerism. Biblical discipleship is not an option, but the only way for anyone who wants to obey Christ and serve his church.

Help me, God.

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*views expressed are those of the author.*