An Exciting Challenge
Dedicated! Devoted! Disciplined! Diligent! Daring! Dynamic! What difference would disciples demonstrating these characteristics make in your church and community? One such group described in Acts 17:6 turned their part of the world upside down.

“When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too.’” (Holman CSB)

From that point on, courageous followers of Christ have participated valiantly in this world changing mission. Today, the world we face could use a little upheaval. If upside down means opposite of the worldly mess seen on the evening news or heard in office conversations, bring it on.

If you listen carefully, you can hear the challenge of those who have walked before us, “Turn it upside down”. The challenge comes not with harsh criticism, but with a hint of anticipation. They know something many of us have yet to discover. As a parent encourages a child who hesitates to do something that brings certain joy, these voices of the past encourage us to plunge into the deep water. Be disciples who make a difference in observable ways. Excitement awaits those who choose to be different.

Most contemporary Christians probably like the thought of making a difference. Listen to a few as they talk in a local coffee shop. They are tired of the wickedness of the world and the onslaught of evil ripping individuals and families unmercifully. Many hunger to make a stand and challenge the status quo, but aren’t quite sure how to become disciples equipped with the necessary qualities.

“Turn the world upside down” stirs the hearts of Jesus’ followers. A vast army of world changers fill the churches of America Sunday after Sunday. When they hear the truth of God’s Word, their hearts burn with anticipation. Unfortunately for many, the fire fades as they walk away feeling unable to meet the challenge. Disappointment moves to the head of the line. Joy and blessing take a back seat.
A Remarkable Purpose
How can the disciple’s heart retain the fire of inspiration? Maybe the incredible response to *The Purpose Driven Life* reveals the answer or at least provides some pretty good hints. People want to know why they exist and God’s intentions for them personally. Sure, they may have some interest in the big picture, but the prevailing question continues to be “What does God want for me?” To the Corinthian, Ephesian, Philippian, and Colossian disciples the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul giving them an answer.

“We all, with unveiled faces, are reflecting the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.” 2 Cor. 3:18 (Holman CSB)

“… so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world.” Phil. 2:15 (Holman CSB)

“…until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.” Eph. 4:13 (Holman CSB)

“…and have put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of his Creator.” Col. 3:10 (Holman CSB)

What a remarkable purpose! We are to be reflections of the Lord shining like stars on a crystal clear night. We are the image of the Creator measuring maturity by the fullness of Christ. Shining stars, Creator images, Christlike reflections describe God’s intentions for His followers. God uses disciples who reflect and shine like Christ to change the world, to turn it upside down.

How in this world does such a heavenly transformation occur? Fortunately, becoming like Christ centers on His work in us and not our work for Him. Peter, one of those early shining star world changers explained

“For His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires.” 2 Pet. 1:3-4 (Holman CSB)

Every disciple already possesses the necessary qualities and equipment to become like Christ. The moment we trust Christ for forgiveness the divine transformation begins. The blood of Christ covers our sin and the power of the resurrected Lord surges through our dead spirit raising it to eternal life. That initial stage of transformation stands completed at conversion. However, additional work remains before disciples clearly reflect His glory and shine like stars. Though that additional transformation remains an activity of God and not man, He clearly gives each disciple personal responsibility for growth. God changes us as we learn more about His ways and follow Him in obedience.

“If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” John 13:17 (Holman CSB)

“So then, we must pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.” Rom. 14:19 (Holman CSB)
“Do what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” Phil. 4:9 (Holman CSB)

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Pet. 1:5-8 (Holman CSB)

“But have nothing to do with irreverent and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness.” I Tim. 4:7 (Holman CSB)

“But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does.” James 1:25 (Holman CSB)

Look at some of the verbs in those verses. Do, pursue, make effort, train, persevere, and act describe the disciple’s responsibility in this transformation process. Without question, God does the renewing, the empowering, the re-creating but disciples must do the yielding, the submitting, and the obeying. Such is the nature of this man-God relationship.

Discipleship is the process God uses to accomplish His transforming work in us. Some define discipleship as the lifelong journey of obedience to Christ that transforms a person’s values and behavior and results in ministry in one’s home, church, and the world. Define it any way you like and approach it any way you want, but measure it by its fruit. Christ intends for those who follow Him to “…deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34 Holman CSB). He expects followship to be demonstrated by obedience. “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24 Holman CSB). He commissions all disciples to reproduce themselves in others. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations…” (Matt. 28:19 Holman CSB).

A Fruitful Process

How can a church develop a discipleship strategy that demonstrates effectiveness by empowering disciples to be world changers? Churches implementing a discipleship strategy identified by the following characteristics produce disciples who make a difference. Approaches vary from church to church but these characteristics form a unifying connection.

- Effective discipleship must be intentional and ongoing. A hit and miss, part-time, seasonal effort produces little fruit.
- Effective discipleship must be comprehensive in church practice.
  a. Every action of the church should be connected with the strategy to disciple believers. For example, Sunday School and other ongoing open group Bible studies provide foundational discipleship and a lab environment to practice leadership and ministry skills learned in other discipleship experiences. Closed groups provide short-term experiences that demonstrate a deep degree of accountability: for attendance, preparation, participation, transparency, and confidentiality.
b. Every stage of discipleship should be given intentional focus.
   i. New Disciple – How does the church help the new disciple begin the journey of discipleship?
   ii. Growing Disciple – How does the church help all disciples grow spiritually, develop skills for ministry, and learn to disciple others?

c. Every age disciple is included in the strategy: adult, student, childhood
• Effective discipleship must be transformational. Disciples should be more like Christ in attitudes and actions as a result of discipleship. This transformation process follows a biblical pattern described with three simple words; Be, Know, Do.
   a. Be – Who the disciple becomes at conversion as a child of God and who he is becoming through the ongoing renewal work of the indwelling Spirit. Disciples need help to evaluate the progress of personal transformation. In attitudes of the heart and actions of daily living does the disciple look more like Christ?
   b. Know – What the disciple learns about God. This learning comes through studying His Word, seeing His Work, and hearing His Voice. Knowing God more completely provides fuel for the ongoing transformation.
   c. Do – What the disciple does in response to what he knows about God and who he is. As stated previously, Christ expects obedient action.

These three transformational elements exist as interdependent actions. In isolation, neither has the ability to produce a Christlike reflection in a disciple. Together, they serve as catalysts for a God-work that changes the disciple from the inside. A world-changing mission results from the interaction of these transformational elements.
• Effective discipleship must be accountable and relational. Disciples cannot grow in isolation from the fellowship of others. Lone ranger disciples often become ineffective and unproductive. Iron does sharpen iron.
• Effective discipleship must be focused. Providing disciples specific spiritual disciplines to target for their growth and evaluation makes discipleship more concrete. Growth in Christlikeness becomes more of a “can do now” that an “ought to someday.”
• Effective discipleship must use relevant methods to implement the strategy. Home-based small groups, church-based short term and ongoing groups, self-directed studies, on-line opportunities, enrichment events, leader training events, and many other approaches form a resource pool for effective discipleship methods. Church leaders need to discover what works best in their specific situation.

Remember these words; intentional, comprehensive, transformational, accountable, focused, and relevant. These criteria can help leaders evaluate whatever discipleship strategy the church implements. The following model builds on these criteria. This model is presented not as the sole prescription for doing discipleship but as one approach among many. For those desiring specific instructions for developing an effective discipleship strategy, the model helps make the necessary plans. For others, it may provide some “think about this” suggestions. Start now setting your church’s course for a discipleship strategy that produces world changers through the power of God.