

PASTORS

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A practical guide to intentional one-on-one discipleship: how to start, what to cover, how to structure it, marks of maturity, and the multiplication principle

James Bell

Lead Pastor | Founder, Pastors Connection Network | Author & Speaker

Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

The Case for One-on-One Discipleship

The most world-changing ministry in history was conducted not through mass events, institutional programs, or media campaigns, but through an itinerant rabbi investing three years in twelve ordinary men. Jesus preached to thousands. He healed hundreds. He fed multitudes. But he disciplined twelve. And through those twelve -- flawed, slow-learning, occasionally cowardly men who received the Spirit and were transformed -- the gospel reached every nation within a generation. The strategy was not scalable in the modern sense. It was intimate, inefficient by organizational metrics, and entirely dependent on the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the taught. It changed the world.

The contemporary church has largely inherited a discipleship model that inverts Jesus's priorities: we invest enormous resources in the Sunday morning experience for hundreds or thousands, and relatively little in the kind of intensive individual formation that Jesus made the core of his strategy. We have excellent programs, outstanding worship production, and sophisticated small group systems. What we have largely lost is the practice of an experienced disciple of Jesus deliberately and systematically forming a less experienced one through sustained relational investment.

"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

-- 2 Timothy 2:2

Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 describes four generations of discipleship in a single sentence: Paul to Timothy to faithful men to others. This is not merely a pedagogical technique -- it is a multiplication strategy. If each of these generations faithfully reproduces itself in just three disciples, the fourth generation involves 81 people who have been formed through intentional, relational discipleship. If this process continues for ten generations, it has touched tens of thousands of lives without ever losing the personal, relational character that makes it powerful.

The multiplication mathematics are compelling, but they are not the primary reason to disciple one-on-one. The primary reason is that this is how human beings actually change. Not primarily through lectures (though they have their place). Not primarily through programs (though they can support formation). People change through sustained, trusted, challenging, grace-filled relationships in which they are known, loved, confronted, instructed, and released into their calling. You cannot fake this. You cannot program it. It requires a real person making a real investment in another real person over a real period of time.

What Is One-on-One Discipleship?

One-on-one discipleship is a deliberate, covenant-based, time-defined relationship between a more mature follower of Christ and a less mature one, oriented toward the spiritual formation and ministry multiplication of the less mature person. This definition has several important components worth examining.

Deliberate

One-on-one discipleship does not happen by accident. A genuine friendship between a spiritually mature and less mature person can produce some of the conditions for discipleship, but without intentionality -- without a defined purpose, structure, and commitment -- the friendship will likely remain a friendship. Discipleship requires that both parties acknowledge what they are doing, agree to specific commitments, and structure their time together with the formation goal in mind. This intentionality does not have to be stiff or program-like. Some of the best discipleship happens over coffee, in a car, on a walk. But it is not accidental.

Covenant-Based

The discipleship relationship is a covenant, not a consumer transaction. Both parties make specific commitments that they are accountable to keep: commitments of time, honesty, prayer for each other, completion of agreed-upon spiritual exercises, and willingness to be challenged. These commitments are not formal legal contracts, but they are serious enough that both parties understand what they are agreeing to. A brief initial conversation about expectations and commitments -- what we are doing, how often we are meeting, what we hope to accomplish, how we will handle the hard conversations -- sets the relational foundation for everything that follows.

Time-Defined

One of the most common reasons discipleship relationships stall is the absence of a defined timeline. When the relationship is open-ended, both parties gradually reduce their commitment without ever officially ending it. The discipline drifts into friendship, and the friendship, while valuable, loses its formational intentionality. A defined timeline -- typically six months to two years for an initial discipleship relationship -- creates a useful urgency. Both parties know what they are trying to accomplish and how much time they have.

Oriented Toward Multiplication

The explicit goal of discipleship is not just the disciple's personal maturity but their capacity to disciple others. Paul's chain in 2 Timothy 2:2 makes this clear: Timothy is to entrust what he has received to faithful people "who will be able to teach others also." From the very beginning of the discipleship relationship, the discipler is not just forming the disciple in their personal faith -- he is forming a future discipler. This means that the methods used in the relationship are transferable, not dependent on the discipler's unique personality or gifts.

Who to Disciple: The Selection Process

Jesus prayed all night before selecting his twelve (Luke 6:12-13). The selection of disciples is not a casual or accidental process. The pastor who would build a discipleship ministry must think carefully about who to invest his limited discipleship time in. This is not elitism -- it is stewardship. The pastor cannot disciple everyone personally; he needs to identify those who will best use his investment and who are most likely to multiply it in others.

Look for four qualities in potential disciples: (1) FAT -- Faithful, Available, and Teachable. These three qualities together predict more about discipleship fruitfulness than any measure of natural talent or spiritual gifting. A brilliant, gifted person who is not yet consistently faithful, available, and genuinely teachable will make a frustrating disciple. A moderately gifted person who is deeply faithful, genuinely available, and humbly teachable will make an extraordinary one. (2) Hunger. Not just willingness, but genuine spiritual appetite. The person who asks more questions than you answer. The person who shows up to every gathering early and stays late. The person whose life clearly demonstrates that they want more of God.

Also consider the potential for multiplication. Who in your congregation has significant relational networks? Who has the personality and positioning to disciple others once they have been discipled themselves? Who is in a life stage where they are preparing to take on more responsibility -- young leaders, newly married couples, those entering vocational ministry? These are often the highest-leverage discipleship investments.

How to Structure the Discipleship Relationship

The structure of a discipleship relationship should be simple enough to be replicable by the disciple when they begin discipling others. Overly complex, highly programmatic discipleship approaches often produce disciples who are dependent on specific materials or methods and cannot reproduce naturally what they received artificially. The best discipleship structures are lightweight enough to adapt to many contexts while substantive enough to produce genuine formation.

The Regular Meeting

Meet weekly or biweekly for 60-90 minutes. Consistency matters more than frequency -- a biweekly meeting that actually happens is worth more than a weekly meeting that is cancelled half the time. Find a context that is comfortable for both of you (a coffee shop, a home, a church office, a regular meal together) and a time that both parties genuinely protect. The temptation to continually reschedule is the first test of commitment, and the pattern established in the first few weeks tends to persist.

The Four Elements of a Good Discipleship Meeting

Every discipleship meeting should include some balance of four elements: connection (genuine check-in on how the person is actually doing), content (engagement with Scripture, theological teaching, or a shared reading), application (reviewing how last week's commitments went and setting this week's), and prayer (genuine, specific, mutual intercession). The proportions will vary by meeting and by season of the relationship. In early meetings, connection takes more time. As the relationship matures, content and application deepen. Prayer should be substantial in every meeting.

Accountability That Is Grace-Filled and Honest

The accountability dimension of discipleship is the most sensitive and the most transformational. It requires the discipler to create an environment in which the disciple feels genuinely safe to be honest -- about failures, temptations, doubts, and patterns they are ashamed of -- while also holding them to the commitments they have made. This is a narrow path. Too much grace without accountability produces comfortable confession without genuine change. Too much accountability without grace produces performance and hiding.

The tone of accountability should be: "I am for you. I am committed to your genuine growth, which means I will love you enough to tell you the truth and hold you to what you said you wanted. I will not condemn you for failure. I will not pretend failure does not matter. We are in this together." The discipler who embodies this posture will find that the disciple opens up with a depth of honesty that transforms the relationship.

What Discipleship Actually Covers

One-on-one discipleship is not primarily a Bible study. It is a comprehensive formation process that addresses every dimension of the person's life in relation to God and to others. The content of a good discipleship relationship covers five broad domains: theological formation, spiritual disciplines, character development, relational health, and ministry preparation.

Domain 1: Theological Formation

The disciple needs a robust, coherent theological framework -- not seminary-level systematic theology (though that has its place), but a clear understanding of the Gospel, the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, the role of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the church, the authority of Scripture, and the eschatological hope that gives present obedience its ultimate meaning. Many Christians who have been in church for years have significant theological gaps -- they have heard sermons, but they have never been walked through a systematic understanding of what they believe and why.

The discipler does not need to be a theologian to cover this ground. A good introductory systematic theology (Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Michael Bird's *Evangelical Theology*, or Thomas Oden's *Classic Christianity*), worked through together over the course of the discipleship relationship, can provide the theological structure. The discipler's role is not to lecture but to engage the material together, to help the disciple connect doctrinal truth to real life, and to model what it looks like to take theology seriously without becoming theological.

Domain 2: Spiritual Disciplines

The spiritual disciplines are the practices through which we create space for God to transform us. They are not techniques for earning God's favor or generating spiritual experience -- they are habits of receptivity. Richard Foster's classic taxonomy (*Celebration of Discipline*) provides a useful framework: inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, study), outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, celebration).

In the context of one-on-one discipleship, the discipler does not simply tell the disciple about the spiritual disciplines. He models them, practices them with the disciple where appropriate, and helps the disciple develop their own sustainable rhythm. Praying together is itself a form of prayer formation. Reading Scripture together and observing what each of you notices is a form of Bible study formation. The discipleship relationship is itself a form of spiritual community.

Pay particular attention to the practice of Scripture engagement. The disciple who learns to read the Bible for themselves -- not just for information but for encounter, not just for moral instruction but for the living voice of God -- has been given the most valuable single spiritual formation tool available. Teach them to meditate on a passage, to journal their observations, to listen for what the text is doing rather than just what it is saying. A disciple who can engage Scripture deeply and personally will never be entirely dependent on a pastor for their spiritual formation.

Domain 3: Character Development

Discipleship is ultimately about character -- the formation of the image of Christ in the life of the disciple. This is not behavior modification. It is not a list of virtues to perform. It is the deep transformation of the inner person: the desires, the affections, the habitual responses, the reflexive reactions that reveal who a person actually is when they are not performing for an audience.

Character formation requires honest attention to the specific areas where the disciple is most likely to fall -- not in general, but specifically. The proud person needs particular attention to the discipline of submission and the practice of genuine listening. The person driven by fear needs particular attention to the promises of God and the practice of trust. The person prone to lust needs particular attention to the habits of mind and the accountability structures that protect their integrity. The person who struggles with anger needs particular attention to the slow work of reconciliation and the Christlike practice of responding rather than reacting.

Domain 4: Relational Health

Many Christians have significant relational wounds and patterns that they carry into every relationship and that undermine their effectiveness in ministry. The discipleship relationship is one of the few contexts in the church where these patterns can be addressed directly, with sufficient relational trust to make the confrontation productive rather than painful.

Does the disciple have a pattern of passive-aggressiveness in conflict? Does he struggle with emotional intimacy? Does she consistently give more in relationships than she receives, and then resent it? Does he have an unresolved wound from a parent or spouse that colors how he relates to authority? These patterns, left unaddressed, will eventually derail ministry effectiveness no matter how theologically formed and spiritually disciplined the person becomes. The discipler who is attentive to relational patterns and willing to name them gently does the disciple an invaluable service.

Domain 5: Ministry Preparation and Calling

Every disciple has a calling -- a specific way in which God has designed them to serve the Kingdom. One of the discipler's most important responsibilities is to help the disciple identify, clarify, and begin walking in their calling. This involves helping them understand their spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, Romans 12), their natural abilities and temperaments, the experiences God has used to form them, and the specific needs and opportunities around them that their gifts are suited to address.

As the discipleship relationship matures, the discipler should begin actively preparing the disciple to disciple others. This means not just forming them in content but forming them in method -- helping them understand what they are learning so they can teach it, why the practices they are being led through are effective, and how to build a similar relationship with someone else. The discipleship relationship is simultaneously formation and apprenticeship: the disciple is being formed in Christ and trained in the practice of forming others.

The Pastor as Both Discipler and Disciple

(continued)

Every pastor should be personally discipling 3-5 people at any given time. This is not optional for those who want to see their ministry multiply. It is the mechanism through which the most lasting pastoral fruit is produced. The disciples you invest in will invest in others, who will invest in others, long after you have moved to another congregation or graduated to glory. Nothing else you do in ministry has that kind of multiplicative potential.

But every pastor also needs to be in a discipleship relationship himself -- with someone further along the journey, more experienced, more mature in the specific areas where he struggles most. The pastor who has no one speaking into his life, asking him the hard questions, holding him accountable to his own standards, and calling out both his best and his worst -- that pastor is operating without the most important resource God has provided for human formation. No amount of personal discipline replaces the ministry of a wise, godly mentor in your life.

Reflection Questions for the Discipling Pastor

1. Who are you currently discipling one-on-one? If no one, what has been the specific obstacle? Is it time? Priorities? Not knowing how to start? Fear of the vulnerability that genuine discipleship requires?
2. Who is discipling you? If no one, what would it take to initiate or deepen a mentoring relationship? Who in your circle is far enough ahead of you in the specific areas where you most need formation?
3. How would your congregation look in 10 years if every adult member was both being disciplined and discipling someone else? What would you need to change in your ministry model to move toward that vision?
4. In your current or most recent discipleship relationships, which of the five domains (theology, disciplines, character, relationships, ministry) have you tended to emphasize? Which have you tended to avoid? Why?
5. What is the most significant thing one person has ever done for your spiritual development through sustained, personal investment? How is that shaping what you want to provide for others?

The most important work of your pastoral ministry will not happen on a platform or in a pulpit. It will happen across a table, in a car, on a walk. It will happen in the quiet, patient, costly investment of your life in the life of another person who will one day invest in another who will invest in another. It is slow. It is invisible. And it is how the Kingdom comes.

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