

## APPLYING THE DISCIPLESHIP PRINCIPLES WITHIN PAUL EXPERIENCE TOWARD DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### Abstract

*The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the world in so many ways, and discipleship is not to be excluded from it. Digital discipleship through three main elements (Content Creators, Distributors, and Engagers) is viewed as effective to help the process of discipleship prevail during the challenging time. Before and during the pandemic, the same issues are apparent: the lack of involvement, creativity, and knowledge. Several crucial aspects can be implemented from the experience of Paul to the present digital discipleship approach. Primarily, the content creators may create Christ-centered content, be aware of people's challenges and relate it to the content, and make sure that the content will undergo creative development. Moreover, the distributors should be consistent in presenting Christ, deny self in sharing the content, and should go through a spiritual transformation themselves. Lastly, the engagers may implement Jesus' way of touching lives, be ever-aware of the hardships that may come their way, and always improve their engagement to pursue progress in one's spiritual life.*

**Keywords:** *Discipleship, Covid-19*

### INTRODUCTION

The pandemic shook people throughout the world, and Christians were not excluded. Most Christians are church-dependent, relying on services for nourishment, and ill-equipped to continue their Christian life outside of church gatherings.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the struggle is apparent to those believers who perceive that attendance at church events is the main indicator of good faith.

When Covid-19 hit, the sower's (Matthew 13:3-9) role altered dramatically because the natural mode of operation (seeing people face to face) was labeled dangerous and unsafe.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the classic approach in discipleship (meeting people offline) is now categorized as

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<sup>1</sup> Costea, N. (2020). *19 Covid Lessons the Church Cannot Ignore: Why "Back to Normal" Is Not an Option*. Evangelista Media.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, L., Village, A. & Lawson, S. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches: Is the Rural Situation Really Different. *Rural Theology*, 18:2.

harmful due to the pandemic restrictions. Hence, new ways of conducting discipleship seemed more demanding than it has ever been.

The church mission remains the same despite the new situation of the pandemic. The biblical evidence found within the church should still be delivered regardless of the restrictions. There is a significant need for the Adventist message of hope and wholeness online since many people are hurting, thinking about suicide, or believing there is no hope for their condition which led them to turn to the internet for companionship, understanding, and other things.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the online platform is viewed as appropriate to tackle this issue.

Hunt<sup>4</sup> described that Christians may understand how to utilize social media to spread the gospel but they lack practical knowledge of how to live like Christ while cruising the digital world. This indicates that there is a lack of knowledge and participation concerning digital discipleship. Hence, this paper is viewed as significant to boost the awareness and engagement of digital discipleship within the church.

Consequently, the questions that shall be investigated in this research to address the problem are:

- What are the applicable discipleship principles found in the relationship of Paul and Barnabas?
- How is the current state of digital discipleship within the church?
- How can the structure of digital discipleship benefit from these principles?

There are three purposes of this study. Primarily, it is to expose the aspects of discipleship in the experience of Paul and Barnabas. Secondly, this research is to identify the concept of digital discipleship and its state within the church. Lastly, this study is to suggest ways of implementing the discipleship principles from Paul and Barnabas within the current church through digital discipleship.

### **DISCIPLESHIP PRINCIPLES FROM PAUL IN HIS MINISTRY**

With the world currently battling with the pandemic, the focus of the people is mostly centered on physical health and safety. However, the church ought to acknowledge the urgent need for discipleship despite the situation. Hence, in this section, the principles of discipleship found in Paul's life and ministry shall be examined.

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<sup>3</sup> Domm, J. (2020). *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism* (1st ed.). AdventSource.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt, J. (2019). The Digital Way: Re-imagining Digital Discipleship in The Age of Social Media. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 18.

### Emphasis on Jesus

One of the most crucial elements in Paul's life and ministry is his reverence to Jesus Christ. This emphasis is what Paul often display toward the group of believers at his time. The community of those who proclaim "Jesus is Lord," according to Paul, is made up of people who are linked to one another via a series of interlocking connections that make them one with God in Christ.<sup>5</sup> In other words, he stressed the significance of having a Christ-like connection within believers.

Not only as a community, but Paul's emphasis on the Savior is also regarding the conducts or characters of individuals. Paul encourages Christians to "imitate Christ," referring to himself as an imitator of Christ and encouraging people to follow him as he follows Christ (1 Cor 4:15–16; 11:1; Phil 3:12–17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:9–12).<sup>6</sup> To imitate is not simply doing things that Jesus does, but it means to become more and more like himself.

The selfless character of Christ is also what's being emphasized by Paul. Paul uses Jesus' emptying himself into becoming a servant as an example of how Philippians believers should behave toward each other (Phil. 2:1–8).<sup>7</sup> To be selfish is the exact opposite of who Christ is, hence, to put others before themselves is the kind of heart that Paul wished the believers to possess.

### Willingness to Suffer

After seeing the essence of Paul's ministry which is the emphasis on Jesus, it is important to see how Paul reflects these principles. Paul demonstrates that it is not just excellent arguments but also faithful actions that reveal the gospel's authenticity. Paul's amazing capabilities, as well as his perseverance in the face of tremendous hardship, indicated to the Thessalonians that his teachings were inspired.<sup>8</sup> Consistency is often the main problem within humanity. Paul has proved his faithfulness to the Lord by patiently enduring the sufferings that come along the way.

As he endured the wicked side of the ministry, Paul taught the believers what he had experienced. Paul's descriptions of discipleship reveal that it may come at a tremendous cost to the believer (2 Tim 2:3–7).<sup>9</sup> To display the things that may come in the ministry is crucial to

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<sup>5</sup> Downey, M. (2000). *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne, G. F., Martin, R. P., & Reid, D. G. (1993). *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>7</sup> Elwell, W. A., (1997). *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

<sup>8</sup> Gorday, P. (2000). *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>9</sup> Lea, T. D., & Black, D. A. (2003). *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

provide awareness and necessary anticipation as the believers strive to progress in faith through Christ.

Not just enduring and teaching about the obstacles within the ministry, Paul also sees a unique side of this element. The suffering of some kind—sickness, starvation, poverty, persecution—is seen by Paul as an important aspect of Christian maturity, and hence of the testing process.<sup>10</sup> Hence, to suffer is viewed as crucial in a Christian's life for it boosts spiritual maturity.

Paul is truly acquainted with the suffering in his Christian life as he connects what he experienced with the believers as Jesus endured the same thing. The disciple, according to Paul, is bound to suffer as Jesus did (1 Cor 4:9–13).<sup>11</sup> In other words, he told the believers that as Christians are followers of Christ, it is only logical that they will taste a similar experience of their Lord.

### Maturing in Faith

Another crucial aspect of discipleship within Paul's life is the importance of maturity in the faith. The Corinthians were supposed to be developing in their faith, yet they were still acting like spiritual babies, according to Paul.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Paul put a significant amount of attention toward the believers' maturity in their Christian lives. He is not pleased with the immaturity within the congregation of believers of Christ.

Paul wanted the church to know the importance of maturity, especially, within its leadership. A church should not lay the weight of leadership duty on someone who does not have a level of maturity as a disciplined believer, according to Paul's instructions to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:1, 2).<sup>13</sup> Without qualified or mature people (in Christian life), the church's administration won't function properly. Hence, Paul wanted the church to highly value the faith maturity within their leadership.

"Join with others in following my example," Paul said in Philippians 3:17, urging believers to mimic his passion, endurance, and maturity.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the example of spiritual maturity, Paul gives himself as a model for the church. Paul's testimony becomes a barometer of maturity for the congregation.

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, P. (2003). *Capturing the Pagan Mind: Paul's Blueprint for Thinking and Living in the New Global Culture*. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman.

<sup>11</sup> Fink, P. E. (2000). *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, A. T. (1997). *What Matters Most: Four Absolute Necessities in Following Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>13</sup> Terry, J. M., Smith, E. C., & Anderson, J. (1998). *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>14</sup> Barton, B. B., & Osborne, G. R. (1999). *1 & 2 Corinthians*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House.

## DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH

As a result of the coronavirus epidemic, the world is currently in an unstable state. No one is immune to this pandemic, which affects individuals of all ages. In addition, many aspects of life have been in a constant state of change. Consequently, the pandemic affects everyone.

Although the novel COVID-19 virus has stunned the world, there are various questions concerning how to effectively stop the virus's spread. People make decisions about the pandemic based on where they reside, their culture, their social position, their age, and the time. Authorities decide on the capacity of confinement, limitation, isolation, quarantine, and health-care programs.<sup>15</sup> There is no question that the pandemic has had an impact on discipleship.

Given this situation, it is critical to examine the extent to which the pandemic has impacted discipleship. This chapter examines the state of discipleship before and after the pandemic. In this part, personal observation is being shown.

### Essential Aspects within Digital Discipleship

Before exploring the state of digital discipleship within the church before and during the pandemic it is important to know the crucial elements within this approach. There are three main aspects of digital discipleship according to Domm.<sup>16</sup>: Content Creators, Distributors, and Engagers. These aspects should be benefited in this study.

The Content Creators are those who put Jesus' gospel message and teachings into digital mediums including video, blogs, photos, podcasts, and so forth.<sup>17</sup> In other words, they are the ones who create or modify the essential principles that the church ought to put online through various social networks. The ones who are doing this must be well-educated with the church's teachings or doctrines. It is also important to note that the content should be relevant and intriguing but within the biblical principles at the same time.

Furthermore, the next element within digital discipleship that's crucial is the role of distributors. According to Domm<sup>18</sup>, the people who take the role of distributors are the ones who spread the content across their digital area of influence using digital tools and technology. Without the distributors, no matter how good the content is, if not published well and effectively, the process of digital discipleship would not progress.

Lastly, the fundamental element within digital discipleship that the author ought to present is the Engagers. Engagers are empathetic persons who participate in online dialogues to develop good connections, better understand needs, and discover relevant ways to help others in

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<sup>15</sup> Allam, Z. (2020). *Surveying the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Implications: Urban Health, Data Technology, and Political Economy*. Amsterdam, Netherlands Cambridge, MA: Elsevier.

<sup>16</sup> Domm, J. (2020). *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism* (1st ed.). AdventSource.

<sup>17</sup> Domm, J. (2020). *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism* (1st ed.). AdventSource.

<sup>18</sup> Domm, J. (2020). *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism* (1st ed.). AdventSource.

society, whether they work for a company or work independently.<sup>19</sup> This role is what separates digital discipleship from other content within the internet. To go deeper in interactions is the main objective of the engagers.

These three roles within digital discipleship are aspects that the author ought to implement concerning the principles acquired in chapter 2. There may be more or other models of digital discipleship, but the author will only highlight these elements. The issues regarding these roles will not be examined within this paper.

### **Before the Pandemic**

Several existing difficulties arose before the covid-19 epidemic, based on personal observation. Several variables, such as traditions and worldviews, impact these aspects. Regardless, it is helpful to examine such characteristics and fix them as needed in order for the church's discipleship to develop.

Lack of involvement is one of the most common issues that the church has when it comes to discipleship. The lack of understanding of the value of participating in discipleship is still a source of concern. Most church members, based on personal observation, still believe that this component is handled only by the pastors or elders. As a result, the rate of discipleship engagement within the church community should be increased.

Another problem that the church's discipleship ministry suffers is a lack of innovation. This development refers to the church's response to global developments, which necessitates the discovery of fresh creative ideas on how to run things within. According to what has been seen, the church would prefer to remain to the same procedures or approaches than grow and learn new ones. As a result, the church is resistant to internal adjustments.

The church's comprehension is the final factor that this research attempts to demonstrate regarding the problem of discipleship within the church before the pandemic. Although most church members appear to have a decent understanding of the doctrines, it shows that they lack knowledge of discipleship principles and how important they are inside the church. They were so intent on improving their knowledge that they overlooked the need of leading others, particularly new converts, to improve their relationship with the Lord. In essence, the church demonstrates a lack of discipleship expertise.

### **During the Pandemic**

The coronavirus pandemic, as observed across the world, has had a wide-ranging impact. The church is not immune to the effects, as many elements of the church have been affected. The present concerns of discipleship, on the other hand, remain intact.

To begin with, it appears that the pandemic has not resolved the question of participation. Many people resort to the internet during the pandemic because they have limited connection to the outside world due to quarantine rules. The church, on the other hand, shows no evidence of

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<sup>19</sup> Domm, J. (2020). *Digital Discipleship & Evangelism* (1st ed.). AdventSource.

attempting to increase its engagement in discipleship. For example, social media may be useful in guiding individuals toward a healthy connection with God. The church, on the other hand, is making slow progress in terms of adjusting to the internet world.

Furthermore, the church, just as it was before the epidemic, is not adaptable enough to new routes of outreach. When the pandemic struck, the church recognized that they couldn't use traditional methods, but they were delayed, if not hesitant, to turn to the internet world and evangelize there. As a result, the church's new ideas are moving slowly. Discipleship is also harmed, as many individuals are suffering a drying of their spiritual friendships due to their lack of internet engagement.

Another important problem that hasn't been resolved since the epidemic is the church's view of discipleship and the internet. The church members are still uninformed about the value of discipleship and how to go about accomplishing it online. People only know how to get familiar with the digital world without creating excellent, biblical material online and communicating with one another directly via online platforms. This demonstrates that the church still lacks information about discipleship, particularly digital discipleship.

### **IMPLEMENTATION OF PRINCIPLES IN DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP**

Based on the information gathered in the preceding sections, the author believes it is necessary to provide some recommendations for future digital discipleship implementation. The author recognizes that there is no set formula for success when it comes to digital discipleship preparation. However, some of the findings from this study may be applicable in a specific setting, such as discipleship inside the church during the epidemic and afterward.

#### **For the Content Creators**

As mentioned, Paul in his ministry put his emphasis on Jesus concerning his heart and attitudes. Therefore, the content creators need to make sure that the content that is produced should point people toward Christ and his love. A common mistake that is constantly seen from the creators is that they tend to lean more towards the principles or things not to do in Christian lives without making sure that the essence of it all is emphasized, which is Christ himself.

Another crucial principle is the willingness to suffer from Paul and how it is significant in Christian life. Hence, the content creators need to be sensitive to the daily hardships that people usually go through. A good acknowledgment of this aspect in life should make the content more relevant and can heal many individuals. The message of assurance that the Lord will always be there even during trials should be delivered online.

Lastly, the content creators should keep in mind the significance of development in faith. In other words, the content should evolve or be more creatively delivered. Moreover, the creators should strive to bring contents that will help the current believers to progress in their spiritual lives.

### **For the Distributors**

As for the distributors or the people who share the content online, it is important to be consistent regarding the emphasis on what they publish. Based on personal observation, many individuals post something biblical online but also shared worldly content afterward. Hence, to present Christ online should come with consistency in publishing.

Another crucial aspect in the life of Paul is his perspective on suffering, claiming that it's necessary concerning the religious state of a person. Although sharing seems not as complicated as the actions of content creators and engagers, to be consistent in sharing is not that easy. The battle to counter one's self against boredom or laziness to sharing the biblical content online is not a small one. It takes a strong bond with the Lord to be enabled to endure the obstacles in publishing Christian content online.

Consequently, the distributors should refer to how it is important to progress in their Christian lives as what Paul emphasized in his ministry. To put the content online is one thing, but it should be balanced with how the distributors live their lives. As they strive to show Jesus online, they should also aim to be more and more like him both online and offline.

### **For the Engagers**

As mentioned, the role of the engagers is to connect with the people who are acquainted with their content online. Hence, the engagers need to engage like how Christ did during his time on earth. They need to be sensitive to the people's needs and struggles and minister to those aspects. To simply display words of encouragement seem not enough for they need to "touch" the heart of the audience as Jesus did to his followers. Moreover, they need to acknowledge that they ought to represent Christ and not to stress their capabilities in the online platforms.

As Paul endured sufferings during his ministry, the engagers should also expect that their experience in this digital discipleship should not be all pretty. Being aware of the possibilities of receiving hurtful words online is important for the engagers. Moreover, it is also crucial for the engagers to always be sympathetic to the people's struggles. Ideally, it is way easier for people to complain about what they're going through without realizing that other people may suffer even more. Hence, prioritizing others' hardships is important for the engagers.

Lastly, the engagers should always pay attention to the progress of one's spiritual life. Their engagement toward the people must progress and not stop until a certain phase. With the people's growth in Christ within the minds of the engagers, the necessary things to aid this process will automatically be pursued.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

There are several aspects from the life and ministry of Paul that are applicable in the present context. Firstly, he always emphasized how it is important to always refer to Jesus in the ministry. Secondly, he showed how he is willing to endure whatever may come in the ministry, especially, the suffering. Thirdly, he displayed how the development of an individual's spiritual journey in Christ should be always in mind.



The covid-19 pandemic has affected the world in so many ways, and discipleship is not to be excluded from it. Digital discipleship through three main elements (Content Creators, Distributors, and Engagers) is viewed as effective to help the process of discipleship prevail during the challenging time. Before and during the pandemic, the same issues are apparent: the lack of involvement, creativity, and knowledge.

Several crucial aspects can be implemented from the experience of Paul to the present digital discipleship approach. Primarily, the content creators may create Christ-centered content, be aware of people's challenges and relate it to the content, and make sure that the content will undergo creative development. Moreover, the distributors should be consistent in presenting Christ, deny self in sharing the content, and should go through a spiritual transformation themselves. Lastly, the engagers may implement Jesus' way of touching lives, be ever-aware of the hardships that may come their way, and always improve their engagement to pursue progress in one's spiritual life.

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