

001 The Definition of Discipleship

Podcast Transcript:

Hello and welcome to the Apprentice Approach podcast. This is Jack McQueeney, and I'll be your host as we dive into the joys, challenges and opportunities of discipleship.

The state of discipleship is in disarray. People want to enjoy a meaningful, connected, fruitful life with Christ, but they're discouraged, unequipped, and don't know where to start. That's why we've poured our 85-plus years of experience into creating a dynamic, transferable framework that will transform the way a person views discipleship and ultimately the way he or she lives.

In this first episode, I'm talking with Jim Downing, Navigator #6, who's been making disciples for almost 80 years. He's still as committed to making disciples today as he was when he was living through the bombing at Pearl Harbor. Now that's another episode, but he's here today, talking about the definition of making disciples. Let's listen in to this master disciplemaker.

Jack: Jim, let me just start right out of the blocks. As we think about discipleship, as we've organizationally wrestled with this idea, this concept we've come over the last 84 years through our ministry, what should be our ministry – I remember Lorne (Sanny, 2nd President of The Navigators) saying things would be confusing and then become clear; I remember Lucy (Sanny, Lorne's wife) challenge him to write things down as things become clear so he doesn't forget – as we walk through these challenging aspects of who The Navigators are, I wanted to give you a chance to explain why, in light of the Great Commission, in the early days with Dawson (Trotman, founder of

The Navigators), why did we choose discipleship?

Jim: I have a little problem with the word discipleship because it's so self-worn, and because it means so many different things to every different person. As I think back to the early days of The Navigators, what Dawson was about was equipping people to reproduce. Now that is not the universally accepted definition of what a disciple is. Our early guys – I was number 6 – I say hundreds on the other side and only five ahead of me. We all met five conditions. We learned later that what we were doing was Biblical. From Luke 14, where Jesus Himself said, "If you want to be my disciple, you must love me more than family, more than career, more than material things, and be willing to take up your cross daily and follow me" to identify with Jesus daily. So that's what our early guys were taught to do. Jesus said, "Well that is a disciple, when you're doing these things."

So Dawson Trotman from the very earliest believed in generations, believed in reproduction, and a keyword is maturity. So he chose discipleship as we call it today – I call it maturity – as the best means toward multiplication and spiritual reproduction.

Jack: So in your mind, as you're trying to describe discipleship with someone you're beginning to meet with, how would you define that?

Jim: In my own mind, what I'm doing is giving them parental care to bring them to maturity. Maturity is measurable. In zoology, when an animal is mature, it reproduces. In botany, when a fruit tree is mature when it reproduces. So the end result of all parental care is that they will reproduce.

Jack: Yeah. That Navigator classic, Born to Reproduce, is still as true today as when it was written so many years ago. At 104 years old, you have a different perspective than most on discipleship. If someone were to ask you, "How do I disciple someone?", what would you say?

Jim: You know, once I met a girl at a Navigator conference, and she'd only been a Christian about a year, and she said, "You know, I think I've figured out what discipleship is all about," and I said, "Tell me." And she said, "It's meeting people's needs." And my reaction was, "Now why didn't I think of that?"

Parental nurture: no two children need the same things at the same time when they grow up. So what do they need to grow and mature? That's what we think about, that's what we do. The first step that I take after someone has converted is to have them memorize verses. Because that's the best way that they will grow, it seems to me. And there are other things, but the key thing is meeting their needs so that they mature.

Jack: As I think about The Hand Illustration, with the important aspects of the impact of The Word, what have you found to be the most helpful aspects over the years?

Jim: Well I like The Hand Illustration; I have changed it a little bit. The way I use it is, we need to feed on the Word to be healthy Christians. We feed on the Word by reading and hearing. We need to study the Word to be intelligent Christians. We need to memorize the Word to be skillful Christians. We need to meditate on the Word to be fruitful Christians. We need to apply the Word to be obedient Christians. So I try to do all those things, getting the Word in my life.

Bret and I have been to a couple conferences in the last couple weeks, and one man came forward and said, "You know, I have never studied the Word intentionally. From now on, I'm going to have an intentional approach." And I'm afraid that's how it is with most folks – they're satisfied with simply reading and hearing.

Jack: Tell us about your first experiences with discipleship – who discipled you?

Jim: I was followed up by – I mentioned there were five ahead

of me when The Navigators first got started and they all had a part – and the way they started was on The Navigator Wheel Illustration, and that seemed to be a good platform on which to start. Actually, I spent a lot of time with Dawson Trotman, but I came to Christ and was followed up by these four guys that he had disciplined, so I'm really a second generation.

Jack: And was that aboard one of the ships in those early days?

Jim: That was the battleship West Virginia, where The Navigators got started.

Jack: Well, tell us about some of your experiences as you've disciplined and met with and followed up with some folks who've come to Christ and were interested in growing spiritually.

Jim: Well, I remember Lordship. I was the postmaster on the ship. I had a private office, and I also had my cot in there, so I really had my own bedroom and everything. One guy's name was Marvin. I'd go out in the morning, to go brush my teeth, he was outside the door with a list of questions, and I couldn't get back in my office until I'd answered those list of questions. He's one of the most eager people I'd ever met, I think. So I had a few like that, as Peter said, who, like newborn babies, desire the sincere milk of the Word, had an appetite for the Word like food.

Jack: What, in your mind, are the marks of a true disciple?

Jim: In the Bible, I think we learn what a disciple is, and then what a disciple does. What a disciple is, again repeat what's in Luke 14 – the greatest disciples I've known in my life love Jesus more than family, more than career, more than material things, and identify with Jesus daily. I think that means being a daily witness. I think I've finally figured out what my job description as a Christian is: it is to be a representative of Jesus Christ. Those are the requirements that Jesus Himself said – “unless you do these things, you can't be

my disciple.” Now that last part, to identify with Christ daily. I have a little oath that I try to follow: I will not deny Christ by my silence. I will not deny Christ by my conduct when I cannot get my own way. I will not deny Christ by sitting on the bench when he says, “Get in the game.”

Jack: As you think about finishing well, I remember asking you a few years ago what that means and you said “I don’t know, I’m not done yet.” But as you think about these things, what else do you think would help others learn how to finish well to make disciples?

Jim: I think about when Christ asked Peter, when some of the disciples began to desert Jesus, “Are you going to desert also?” And I like to paraphrase what Peter said, “Where would I go? You’ve got everything I want.” So anything away from not continuing in that way for the rest of our lives is backward. That’s the reason I’m trying to finish well is what would I do that is the alternative? It’s unacceptable. I realize that health plays a large part of what we do when we’re older, and I thank the Lord for good health.

People ask me sometimes what keeps me going, and in truth it’s selfishness, because I want God’s best. I came to Christ because of the quality of life that these other guys had that I knew. I’m selfish – I want God’s best right up until the day I die.

Jack: You’d mentioned the importance of gratitude in your own life. How does that influence the people around you as you serve as a role model in that?

Jim: I’ve concluded that life is about meaningful relationship with God, with family, and with friends. Those three things bring fulfillment. So I want to continue in that. A meaningful relationship with God, with family, with friends, I think Heaven’s going to be a continuation of that. So I just spend my full time exercising a relationship in those three areas.

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