

DISCIPLE ABUSE

Cultic Studies Journal, 1985, Volume 2, Number 2, pages 288-295

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Where the potential for good is great, so is the potential for harm. How can you avoid destructive discipline relationships?

Child abuse, police brutality, sexual harassment shocking terms that have entered our modern vocabulary in recent years. They refer to painful and often destructive patterns in human relationships when one person misuses a privileged position in order to exploit and dominate another.

Add another term to the list disciple abuse. It happens with alarming frequency.

A man in his early thirties visits with me to talk of disillusionment with his spiritual life, his marriage, and his personal disciplines. As we talk, he refers back to his college days when he and his fiancé (later his wife) had come under the influence of a Christian leader known for a heavy emphasis upon discipling. "What I realize now," he says, "is that we were pressed to become extensions of him rather than more mature versions of what we ourselves really were. Both of us became too tightly tied in the relationship with him.

"We always lived with the fear of disappointing him, of letting him down. I-le had this way of indicating strong displeasure if you disagreed with him. And when my wife and I decided that we were in love and wanted to get married, he simply turned his back upon us. He didn't come to our wedding; he never made contact with us again. It was a terribly disillusioning experience, and to this day (years later) we find it very hard to trust anyone in spiritual leadership.

My visitor is describing some of the results of what I call disciple abuse.

Dangers of Corrupted Intimacy

The act of discipline what I like to refer to as "person growing" is among the most intimate of human relationships. And when there is potential for great intimacy between people, there is the possibility for either growth and development or oppression and destruction. We need to talk often of the marvelous possibilities which come from discipline relationships, but we ought not to ignore the dark side when such intimacy turns sour and disciples are abused.

Dimensions of Discipling

"Here are five critical dimensions in discipline:

The calling/commitment encounter in which a discipline relationship begins.

The mentoring process in which a transference of learning takes place.

The broadening effort in which the disciple-grower opens the eyes of the disciple to possibilities and opportunities by exposing him to responsibility.

The releasing dimension in which the discipler terminates the formal discipling relationships by sending the disciple out to his own tasks.

And, finally, what I call the affirming/appreciating element, which ought to happen continually, long after the formal discipline relationship has been transformed into what I call a friendship.

In each of these critical dimensions there is potential for abuse, and the would-be mentor must show extreme care that what was intended to be people-growing does not turn out to be people-crippling.

Calling/Commitment

Discipling usually has a starting point Jesus encountered Matthew, the tolltaker, for example, and said "Follow me." And Matthew did! A relationship began, and he was slowly shaped into Christlikeness and prepared for a mission.

Why did Jesus pick him? Why, for that matter, did he pick any of the Twelve? There are none of them to whom I would have been drawn. Certainly there is no indication that they were compliant, that they were hero-worshippers, or that they were unemployed or needed something to do. Credit Christ with taking on a strange, divine, hard-to-control team

But not every disciple-grower does it that way. Abusive discipling begins when someone seeks people with the conscious or unconscious aim not of growing or leading them, but of controlling them. Sadly, this can be and often is effectively done in the name of discipling. The extremity of this tendency is cultism.

Substituting Control for Nurture

Such controlling does not produce disciples who are Christlike; it rather provides psychic gratification for the one doing the controlling. The product is an abused disciple.

Some would-be disciple-growers like to control others because they are themselves insecure, uneasy in normal peer relationships, or simply driven to manipulate others for personal emotional gain. Perhaps Diotrephes (cf. 3 In. 9) was one of these.

When these sorts of people emerge in a Christian context (and we must not fail to face "reality"), they cloak their intentions in theological vocabulary and defend their motives and methods in a most impressive Christian framework. Their preferred relationship with a "younger Christian" promises spiritual maturity but in fact leads to relational domination.

The corollary to this potentially abusive situation centers on the one being disciplined. For there are many potential "disciples" who are not that at all. Their motive for accepting a mentoring relationship is not a genuine quest for maturity but an emotional need for a surrogate father or mother.

In our modern times of absentee parents, it is not unusual for young adults to possess a subconscious need for parenting which they did not experience in childhood or adolescence. They seek to fill the voids where there was no authority, affirmation, or rebuke.

For the abusive discipler who wants to control, these are ripe for the picking. For the genuine disciple-grower, they are a drain on his energies, and it is important to discern such inadequate motives before it is too late. Certainly these people need help, but what they need is not discipline but counseling.

The Mentoring Process

There is a delicate balance to be maintained in the discipline relationship. The objective of authentic discipline is to point a person toward maturity by what we call Christlikeness.

Abuse comes when Christlikeness is abandoned for cloning. In the former, the eyes of both parties in the relationship are set upon what it takes to follow Christ; in the latter, the subtle shift comes when the mentor pressures the disciple to become a copy of himself.

We can see examples of this not only in personal discipline relationships but sometimes in religious movements where scores of followers become "duplicates" of the leader who becomes a father or hero

figure. Pressure can be exerted on the “disciples” through the selective use of guilt, fear, anger, threat of ostracism from the larger group, and through a constant barrage of adulation directed toward the leader. In this form of disciple abuse, the disciple-grower sets out to create a clone or a replica of himself or (what may be more the truth) what the discipler wishes he himself could be.

The Christian community was never meant to be a collection of “cookie-cut” human beings. The gospel delights in a Christlike individuality for each disciple. One never sees Jesus, for example, squelching the dynamism of Peter. Rather, He simply seeks to envelop Peter’s temperament in wisdom and spiritual character. The Apostle Peter, who so wisely gives leadership to the Jerusalem church in its early days, is the same Simon Peter of earlier days who was marked with impulsiveness and a competitive spirit. The only difference between the apostle and the fisherman is maturity, not suppressed individuality.

The disciple-grower abuses his son/daughter in the faith when there is disregard for the disciple’s gifts, temperament, and personality style. When these things are forcefully modified, they do not disappear, they are simply suppressed and usually await another time to spring out. And when they do, they emerge in their original immaturity. The process is defeated; the disciple is left abused.

The Broadening Effort

There has been considerable abuse in the ministry of discipline when the one in spiritual directorship has attempted to single-handedly and exclusively control the “world” of the disciple.

It can happen, first of all, when a mentor attempts to assert domination over virtually all-personal decision-making. The disciple may not be permitted to engage in interpersonal relationships without the leader’s approval; he is not to discern the will or purposes of God without consultation; there is no freedom to make decisions without fear of being berated or rebuked; the use of one’s time is carefully controlled and critiqued.

Sadly, there are many people who are only too glad to submit to such an arrangement. They are afraid to think, to make decisions, to take the risks involved in healthy Christian living. They thus open themselves to those who in the name of disciple-making would handle these matters for them by imposing rules, arbitrary expectations, and demands for consultation on all personal matters. “The process eventuates in a dangerous dependency which denies maturity to the disciple and provides unwholesome psychic gratification to the mentor.

This sort of suppression is not always easy to observe at first. The disciple is not aware that he is being manipulated or controlled. In fact, it may only become clear that this is what is happening when the disciple dares to appeal to other authorities or to his own inner awareness.

In such cases the disciple is liable to be ridiculed or threatened with relational isolation, told he is departing from the will of God, or accused of diminishing spirituality. If the disciple has come to love the discipler (or fear him) this can be a powerful deterrent to independent growth. And the result is a serious kind of abuse.

We need to remind ourselves how easy it is for this sort of abuse to occur in Christian circles. If we were talking about the context of business, the dominating person would be threatening the novice with a loss of job. But in the Christian context, one can abuse young believers by appealing to a superior relationship to God which appears to bring with it deeper insight. One can effectively claim mysterious authority and impose the threat of some sort of spiritual judgment.

AU of this can be seriously intimidating to an impressionable young Christian. And it, too, results in abuse.

Releasing/Sending

The dimensions of discipline involve not only a beginning moment, which I have labeled "calling/commitment," but also all healthy discipling relationships terminate with what could be called a "release/send" component.

This is a time when the definitions of discipline and friendship ought to be contrasted. Theoretically, friendships are based upon a peer experience; discipline relationships are not. In mentoring there is clearly a predominant leader in the equation, and that does not exist in the simple friendship.

Furthermore, friendships are not thought of in terms of a termination point; but healthy discipline relationships must always have an end. While friendships emphasize a level of companionship for its own sake, discipline implies the preparation of someone for a function or a level of character quality. Disciples are abused when disciple-growers disregard these contrasts and either permit the discipline relationship to become solely a friendship, without goals of growth and development, before the discipline is completed, or worse yet choose never to release and send the disciple to the goal of the original call and commitment.

Disciple-growers, as a rule, have a difficult time letting go of their proteges. And this is a natural, human tendency. Parents, as many of us have discovered, do not easily face the fact that their children are growing up and no longer need strict parental supervision. In the same way a discipler is frequently tempted to think that his/her charge is in need of continuing protection, training, or consultation. "Bus, no release; limited, if any, sending out to responsibility.

I find it fascinating that Jesus seems always to have sent His disciples out to tasks just before most of us would have felt they were ready. At one point He says to them in a rather ironic turn of words, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves" (Mt 10: 16). It was His way of saying that His men were going to get kicked around, bitterly opposed, and probably humiliated. But that was okay with Him. The learning experience would be invaluable. And when they returned, they'd have a serious mind to listen to further teaching. They would be bursting with questions instead of drowning in cockiness.

Disciple-growers do find it difficult to release disciples. There is a loss of relational power and influence. There is the risk that the disciple may actually move out and begin to beat the disciple-grower at his own "game."

Thus, abuse occurs when the disciple-grower consciously or subconsciously refuses to let go. The mentor may constantly criticize the disciple, making sure that short strings are maintained. He may give the disciple little satisfaction that growth is taking place. The abusive discipler may want to make the disciple think that the relationship is still needed and that the release cannot happen yet (if ever).

When this sort of holding-on happens in families between parents and children, there is often a rebellious atmosphere. There can be serious tension as the younger tries to prove himself to the older and the older attempts to demonstrate through superior knowledge and expertise that the younger is not yet ready for the real world. Everyone loses, and it is not unusual for there to be a long-lasting break in the relationship between parent and child.

The very same negative dynamic occurs in mentoring experiences in which there is a reluctance to release and send. The evidence that this is happening will be seen where a strong leader keeps a never-changing group of people around him each discharging the tasks assigned to him but never released to pursue God's call for himself.

The abused disciple who is not released and sent never has the satisfaction that he has proved his worth to either the mentor or God. The result is stunted growth often causing frustration, anger, and rebellion.

Continuing Affirmation/Appreciation

There is a final aspect of the discipline process that often goes ignored. And that is the importance of a continuing flow of affirmation and appreciation between the disciple-grower and the disciple.

Once there has been a release (healthy or unhealthy) of the disciple, it is not unusual for some mentors to cut themselves off from the disciple. The result: a strange silence!

I have been on the receiving end of that silence from someone who helped disciple me. And I have also become silent toward some whom I had helped disciple. I now understand why that sometimes happens.

Though releasing and sending disciples may be painted as beautiful and satisfying, it is painful nevertheless to release a disciple whom one has loved and cared for no matter how right and ready the time is. The humanness in us sometimes is tempted to believe that the disciple newly released cannot make it without us. He is sure to stumble, we hear ourselves reasoning, sure to come staggering back for help and advice, to admit that he didn't realize how much he needed us. And when it does not happen when the disciple lives a confident, fruitful life without constant oversight the discipler is tempted to feel unneeded and unwanted. "Thus silence. While the disciple-grower waits ... and waits ... and waits for a return that may never happen.

Usually the disciple does not come back, and he may even go on to prove that he not only is everything his discipler originally wanted him to be, but even more.

It is a credit to Christ that he not only trained His disciples to go far beyond the quantitative limits of His own ministry, but also outwardly told them that this was exactly what would happen. "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father (In. 14:12).

This pain of parting sometimes causes the insensitive disciple-grower to assume that his protege does not need continuing affirmation or to be told that what the disciple is achieving and becoming is pleasing to the mentor. Nothing could be further from the truth. Usually, the release and sent disciple is aching for a word of "well done" from his teacher, and hurts badly when it does not come.

Perhaps abuse is a strong word at this point, but it is a fact that the unaffirmed disciple always wonders if the one who taught him really still cares or is interested. With regularity the disciple looks over his shoulder wondering if the old mentor is proud or pleased with what the novice has become, and when no word comes, he is left puzzled and hurting.

Avoiding Disciple Abuse

It is possible to abuse disciples. In fact, it is easy to do it. How can we avoid it? Several thoughts. The disciple-grower must first of all realize that his approval and disapproval through words, the giving of love or the withholding of it, and the modeling of his life is often perceived by the disciple at a far louder and stronger level than the disciple-grower ever meant it to be. My wife often reminds me that what I say at a "4" (on a 1-10 scale) is usually heard at an "8." When I forget that, I often abuse people I really meant to assist.

A disciple-grower must also never forget that the goal of discipline is to present every man mature in Christ (Col. 1:28). Disciple-growers are not out to change people; they are out to grow them. The

gardener does not try by the force of his will to make peas into roses. He merely cultivates the ground in which peas are planted, freeing them to become what God meant them to be.

Finally, the disciple-grower must discipline himself to affirm his disciple and delight in what the disciple is doing. He must be the temporary conveyer of the words, "Well done!" (Mt. 25:21) until they are heard from the Father Himself.

Disciple abuse is a serious matter. Examples abound. "The man I described at the beginning is one of them. As we talk together about his past experience, I try to point out to him that his discipler was quite human after all. He had his needs, his blind spots, his sins. We pray asking for forgiveness for abusive things done years ago that have their effect even today upon a person, a marriage, a concept of God. And when we finish our conversation, I feel as if there has been a release and a healing of some sort. But I'm also very much aware that it is just a beginning. A lot more forgiving and forgetting will have to happen. A very powerful ministry called discipline has been misused; a man and a woman have been spiritually abused. Those of us trusted with spiritual leadership must be careful not to let this happen through us.

*Reprinted with permission from Discipleship Journal (Issue Thirty, 1985).

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