The Tree of Life: Designing a Personal Plan for Discipleship
Colossians 1:28-29

Over the course of the summer, we have been unpacking the eight essential qualities of a Jesus-follower as described in Dana Allin’s little book: Simple Discipleship. We are using these eight qualities as a picture of what we hope to see happen in the life of each person in our church as we grow into mature followers of Jesus. I will recap the eight qualities in a minute, but first I want to emphasize the word GROW, because that’s the goal: that we would all be growing and maturing in our faith, growing into the likeness of Christ, and growing in such a way as to bear fruit that brings glory to God and hope to the world.

Throughout this series we have been referring to “growth” using the imagery of a tree (show image of tree of life), just as Jesus did. This “tree of life” that we are growing is both hidden (i.e. the roots of our tree established in our private life), as well as public (the actions, attitudes, and decisions we make every day that bear fruit). So, our “picture” of discipleship here at Colonial is that of the “tree of life,” and we will regularly encourage you to think about how you are growing in Christ both inwardly and outwardly.

Now, let’s quickly review the eight qualities of a disciple, and the subsequent characteristics that accompany each quality. Allen provides this diagram to help us see it all at one time: (show diagram of qualities and characteristics).

As you can see, each quality of the disciple is accompanied by predictable characteristics. So, the first quality (A Gospel Saturated Life) is accompanied by two characteristics (1. Gospel-centered identity and 2. Gospel-centered actions). The second quality, (Connected to God) is demonstrated through the characteristics of sacrificial living, satisfied living, generous living, and devoted living. Now, as you look over the list of qualities and characteristics, I would remind you that your pastors have taught through each quality and the accompanying characteristics this summer, so if you have been away or would like greater clarity on any of these qualities, take a minute and review the sermons…or even better, pick up a copy of Dana Allin’s Simple Discipleship and read the chapters that speak to your questions.

Now, before I move on…let me make a simple observation about these eight qualities and the whole subject about discipleship. Here’s my observation: in every field of life, in every desire of the human heart, in every issue that you are struggling with, in every evil that we face as a culture…the very best thing that you could possibly do…in all of those domains of life…is this: BE a DISCIPLE; MAKE a DISCIPLE.

While I was on vacation a good friend contacted me with tremendous anguish in his heart over the recent shootings in El Paso that targeted Hispanics. He was upset that, from his perspective, the evangelical church was not taking a strong enough stand against racial profiling. Other church members are furious over the issue of abortion, and they would like the church to take a stronger, more public stand against abortion. Still others are concerned about the LGBTQ legislation that is being voted upon in our local town councils, or the permissive “sex education” that is being taught to our children in the public schools. Many are concerned about racism and equal rights. Some of us have recently returned from walking the slums of Nairobi, while others
served among the poor in Guatemala or the Lakota tribe in South Dakota…and our hearts long for justice, provision, and healing in these communities oppressed by generational poverty. I hear from many people on a frequent basis regarding their concerns and what they think the church should be doing. I often feel overwhelmed by all the demands from our church members who want the church to take a stand, promote a candidate, send money, create a program, submit a letter in the paper, or what have you.

Church, listen to me: your concerns are valid, and perhaps your ideas have merit. But here’s what we learn in scripture as well as human history: the best and most effective prescription for all of these painful realities remains the same—BE a DISCIPLE, MAKE a DISCIPLE. Why? Because Disciples of Jesus Christ exhibit qualities and characteristically live in ways that lead to healing, hope, and justice because disciples bring the light of Christ into all the domains of life. Armies and governments and programs and public statements have been tried over and over again throughout history, but they do not bring about change. The greatest, most powerful change agents in the world for the past 2000 years have been ordinary people given over to the Lordship of Jesus Christ…period! I invite you to challenge me on this statement…my email is on the website…take your best shot. You will lose the argument. Beginning with Jesus and His disciples, I challenge you to find any person or group of people who brought about as much or more positive change in the world to the degree of those who were abandoned to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When it comes to science, medicine, feeding the hungry, emancipation of slaves, justice for the oppressed, racial equality, the elevation of women and children, the value of marriage and family, to the arts, architecture, and even technology itself…the most powerful change agents of the past 2000 years have been those ordinary people abandoned to the Lordship of Christ…they were disciples of Jesus concerned with making disciples of Jesus. Think about it Church: if saving the world depended upon armies, governments, programs or statements, Jesus would have commanded us to go “make” those things because we know that Jesus came to save the world, as he stated in John 3. But do you know what Jesus said? Do you know what His prescription was for saving the world? Matthew 28:18-20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Church, please do not roll your eyes or grow weary of being a disciple and making disciples. Nothing could be of greater importance…nothing can or will make a greater impact in the world…there is no greater investment with greater returns. Being a disciple and making a disciple is THE pathway towards changing the world…and it happens one person at a time, beginning with you….beginning with me. Amen?

So, to that end, the goal of this series has always been to prepare each person to develop a personalized plan for growing as a disciple, to the end that we would be effective at helping others to grow as disciples. So, for the remainder of my time, I want to walk you through four steps towards developing your personalized plan of discipleship: 1) Take a personal assessment online; 2) Create your plan; and 3) Share your plan; 4) Live out and regularly reassess your plan.

1) Take a Personal Assessment Online—Colonial’s leadership has made it possible for each person here, and those watching online, to take a personal assessment that will help you to identify areas where you are strong in your discipleship, and areas of potential growth. I have
taken the survey myself, and it took about 15 minutes. If you have not yet taken the assessment, here are the basic directions. I will put them on the screen so that you can take a picture with your phone, or you can watch this message later on our website. First, PRAY. Pray first that the Lord will allow you to be open and honest as you answer the questions…the assessment will be a total waste of time if you don’t tell the truth. OK, now: here’s how you go about taking the assessment. First, you will type Colonialkc.org/discipleship into your web browser or your Google search box. This will take you to our webpage where you will find the link to the assessment, as well as the following directions:

Type “Colonialkc.org/discipleship” into your browser or Google search box.
1. Click on the Take the Assessment
2. Create an account (Sign Up)
3. Click Menu -> Assessments -> Discipleship 360 Assessment -> Take the Assessment button
4. Enter your name and email and the names and emails of those who you’d like to take the assessment on your behalf
5. Enter the promo code: 1COLONIAL
6. Take the assessment (allow 10-15 minutes)
7. After a week or two, log back into your Flourishmovement.com account
8. Click on Generate Report

Now, these directions are important, and of course, I did not actually read all of them when I tried to take the survey, so please learn from my mistakes! Once you click on the link to the survey, you will be sent to flourishmovement.com’s website where you will need to create an account, which consists of entering your name, email, and your chosen password. No money or credit card number is required! Then, once you register, click on the menu in the top right hand corner and click on “assessments,” then the Discipleship 360 Assessment. Then finally, the “Take the Assessment” button. Now, what comes next is really important. Not only will you fill out your name and email, but you will want to list a few other names and emails who will be invited to assess you as well. I sent out an invitation to my wife, two elders of our church, and three staff members that work closely with me. This assessment REQUIRES at least one other person to take it with you, so please pray about who you can invite to take the survey on your behalf, and then list their names and email addresses as requested. Then, when asked for payment (this assessment would usually cost $15/person) please enter the code 1COLONIAL in all caps. This code will empower you to take the survey for free, compliments of your loving Church Leadership! Next, you will take the assessment for yourself. You can then check back later for your results after one of your friends/family complete the assessment on your behalf. Remember, you won’t be able to generate a report until at least one other person has taken the assessment on your behalf. Once that has been done, you will log back into Flourishmovement.com and click on “Generate Report.”

Now, if we have your email, all of this information has been sent to you in our weekly email…all you will need to do is click on “Take the Discipleship 360 Assessment” and then follow the directions. We will include the link again this week, so look for an email from us in your inbox.

2) Create a discipleship plan

The next step is to create a discipleship plan based upon what you learn in the assessment or whatever conviction you have received from the Lord. Remember, the assessment is a tool to help you get a picture of how you are doing in terms of the eight qualities that we have been
looking at this summer. Don’t let the assessment upset you or bother you…it’s a tool, so if it’s helpful, great. If not, simply pray and ask the Holy Spirit where He wants you to grow in your faith. Either way, the next step is to make a plan. You know this is true, but I’ll remind you anyways: when we fail to plan, we plan to fail. That is true in so many aspects of life, and it holds true when it comes to our spiritual growth as well. We all need to make a plan and then do our best to stick to the plan. So how does that work?

First, we must identify our area of focus. Your area of focus will likely be an area where you scored a bit lower and perhaps others were helpful to identify that area as an opportunity for growth as well. So, let’s say my area of focus is “connection with God…” because I determined in my assessment that though I believe in God, I’m not spending much time fostering a connection with God. So, that’s my area of focus.

Next, I need to establish a goal. My goal should be specific and time sensitive…probably a 2-3 month goal. So, my goal might be something like: “By Oct. 30th, I will develop the habit of daily prayer twice a day for 15 minutes, fasting one day a week, and time spent in the scriptures each morning.” Notice that my goal is to develop new habits for connecting with God.

Now, how will I structure and implement my plan in order to accomplish my goal?

Dana Allin provides a wonderful template that he learned from Malcom Webber many years ago called, “The Four D’s.” I will throw an illustration of the Four D’s up here on the screen for your consideration (show Four D’s illustration from page 111 in Allin’s book). The Four D’s stand for the four different dimensions of our plan in regards to growing spiritually. The four dimensions, as you can see, include: 1) engage with God; 2) engage with others; 3) engage with truth or knowledge; and 4) engage with experience.

No matter where your focus for growth may be, you will want to develop your plan in such a way as to address all four dimensions. So, here is a possible format for how you might develop your plan (show image from page 131). After naming your focus and your goal, you can then list out activities that you will practice in all four dimensions.

So, for me, to attain my goal I will first engage God. My activity in that first box will be to ask God to give me a hunger for His Word, to call me to prayer and to meet me in my prayer time, to empower me to fast, and to hear my heart that I long to have a deeper connection with Him. There can be no spiritual growth apart from the work of God’s Holy Spirit, so church: remember, PRAY FIRST.

In the next box down, I want to engage others with my plan, so I will share my plan with my wife and two of my elders who can hold me accountable by asking me about my prayer time, my scripture reading, and my commitment to fast one day a week. I will ask them, along with people I trust, to pray for me that I would faithfully pursue a deeper connection with God.

In terms of engaging with experience, I may decide to schedule a mini-retreat where I can spend an entire day or two seeking a deeper connection with God, or perhaps I will enlist the help of a spiritual advisor. For many of us, we need to be plugged into a serving opportunity that leads us
out of our comfort zone. Still others need to engage with a group that can help us grow. Opportunities to get connected in groups and in service will be featured this afternoon at the “Find your Niche” lunch after the service today. You can also check out opportunities for connecting into groups and ministries on our website.

In terms of engaging with truth and knowledge, I may commit to re-read several chapters of Richard Foster’s work on the spiritual disciplines; or again, perhaps I will join a group that will help me process God’s truth as it pertains to a deeper connection with Him.

In all four dimensions, my activities need to be realistically attainable by October 30th, at which time I will reassess and renew my plan, perhaps with the same focus, or perhaps I will take on a new focus with new goals.

3) Share your plan. Once you have created your plan, it is essential that you share your plan with at least one other person. We all need other people in order to grow, and Allin lists a few ways to go about that.

One way is to enter into a mentoring relationship with someone you respect as a spiritual leader or elder in your life. This would simply involve approaching that person with the request that they look at your plan, give you some feedback and suggestions, and then discuss the plan with you from time to time so as to provide accountability and friendship as you seek to grow in your faith.

Another way to share your plan is to create a triad, where there is not necessarily a leader or an elder, but just three friends who are willing to share their plans and to hold each other accountable. By the way, I think the triad option is a GREAT idea for many of us who are very busy and particularly those who travel. Over the past year, I have had the honor of praying with two elders on a weekly basis. The call takes about 30 minutes, but it has become a true blessing for all three of us. No one is the “leader” in our group, but we do have one guy who has served as the call initiator. As you know, I am a very “busy” person with great demands on my time, but this triad approach works for me, and I suspect it would work for many of us.

Another way to share your plan is in a small group. Most groups have topics and pre-existing dynamics that are not all that conducive to sharing your plan, but some groups are getting kicked off this fall with that end in mind. Still other groups are opportunities to find a mentoring relationship or to start a triad from those in the group. You can learn about our groups by clicking on the groups link on our website.

Whatever you decide to do, please make a commitment to share your plan with others…you will need that accountability if you truly hope to grow as a disciple.

4) Live out and regularly assess your plan.

The final step is to live out your plan. Let me give you some pastoral advice: changing behavior is hard work, and living out your plan will require you to extend grace to YOU! You will have good days and bad days, good weeks and bad weeks, but here’s the deal: stick with the plan, and when you fail, brush it off and resume the plan to the best of your ability. If the plan
turns out to be completely unrealistic, amend the plan and share your amendments with your community.

For example, I may plan to have two 15 minute prayer sessions a day, but after the first two weeks, I’ve only succeeded in having one 15 minute prayer session on 6 of the 14 days, and I’ve not had two sessions on a single day in that time period. Rather than feel like a horrible failure, it would probably be more beneficial for me to amend my plan and set a goal for one 15 minute session each day between now and October 30th. One prayer session is still better than days without set apart prayer time, and that is likely a more reasonable goal than what I had previously planned.

Remember, your personalized plan for discipleship is not designed to heap shame upon your life! Your plan should be something you truly long for in terms of your growth, and with God’s help, any progress towards your goals will lead to new growth in your walk with Christ. And let’s not forget: every time you grow even a little in your relationship with Jesus, the world benefits! Your kids benefit, your marriage benefits, the poor benefit, the oppressed benefit…the whole world is blessed because there is a little bit more Christ in you today than there was a few months ago…that’s the goal.

Now, some of you are going through a difficult and painful season, and you may be thinking this message is not for you. Listen: God wants to heal what is broken in your life. So, make a plan to get started on your healing journey. We have several groups and events this fall designed to comfort and care for those who are hurting. Make no mistake: your healing is a significant step towards being a fully functioning disciple, so take your healing seriously and take advantage of those groups and ministries that are provided to help you along the way.

Now Church, you know it’s my job…it’s my calling…it’s the passion or our pastors and elders, to see each and every one of you mature in your relationship with Jesus. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:28-29, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

From the beginning of the Believe Series through the Tree of Life Series, we have taught you the essentials of what it means to be a Christ-follower. We have taught you what it means to Think Like Christ, to Act Like Christ, in order to Become Like Christ. We have taught through the eight essential qualities of a disciple, and now we have equipped you with an assessment tool and instructed you on how to develop your own personalized plan for growth.

I have a question for you: have we, as the leaders of this church, been faithful in our call to make disciples? I hope so…we are trying very hard to be faithful to that calling. But here’s the truth, and you know this is true: your growth as a disciple will hinge upon what you do when you leave this building today. You are responsible for your own spiritual growth, and if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

So I am asking you…each and every one of you, to take the assessment, develop your plan, share your plan, and live out your plan to the best of your ability with God’s help, so that we might
become a church that accomplishes the God-honoring vision that we have written on our walls:
to be the Light of Christ in a hurting culture, so that the lost are found, the broken are made
whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. Amen? Let’s pray.