

Discipleship

By Tom Colarossi

Inmate discipleship programs are geared to men and women of all education and maturity levels. Most of them contain studies of salvation or other Biblical doctrines. Prison-to-Praise International is one of many ministries to use correspondence lessons to impact inmates. Correspondence studies are used to follow-up on a profession of faith, teach spiritual truth to believers, or prepare inmates for Christian service upon release.

Discipleship is one of those all-encompassing terms used to provide (for Christians) a very spiritual sounding aura to our efforts to help someone younger in the Lord than us. And to make matters worse, we have Scripture to back us up. "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." II Timothy 2:2.

Discipleship implies teacher and student. Our Biblical example is Jesus and His disciples. Jesus imparted knowledge to the disciples daily. The teachings were in the course of events that they encountered together. A situation would present itself, Jesus would question them, listen, and then present them with spiritual truth; the point of which they missed for maybe three years. None of this applies to prison "discipleship".

Unless you happen to be in the cell with the inmate, you will not encounter events together. The spiritual truths you present may or may not be received. Everything you write the inmates evaluate. They evaluate what you write based on their own experiences, other Christians they meet (or people who say they are Christian), and their view of God. And often, your teachings come in last to their existing belief system or their friends. To compound this filtering is a reoccurring problem in correspondence. Many inmates do not read carefully. They read a little then assume they know what you are going to say next and skim ahead.

But the most crucial error in this concept of discipleship is the implication of a teacher-student relationship. I say error, because you put yourself above the inmate. You may not intend to do it, but the bottom line is that you are instructing them. This mindset is counterproductive and as long as you maintain the misconception that you are the teacher, you miss the effectiveness and the blessings of prison Bible correspondence. Does not the Bible say, "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."? (I John 2:27)

Every Christian is indwelt with the Holy Spirit (the anointing abideth in you). And you do not need teachers (need not that any man teach you). Therefore it is the Holy Spirit that teaches (as it hath taught you). To what end? That you might be in Christ (ye shall abide in him). Am I saying do away with teachers? Not in the least. I say do away with the mindset that teachers are super Christians; the mentality that formal education is far superior to personal Bible study. And forget the implication that without formal education you cannot know Scripture. Too often I see that those with formal education do not think for themselves but rely on what they have been taught. When a question arises, do we search Scripture? Or do we search the footnotes, and commentaries, and seek what the leading radio and TV preachers have to say? In Bible correspondence it is the Holy Spirit who teaches, your job is to point the inmate to the right Scripture. As a Christian, education as a whole is a poor substitute for experience.

When I was young in the Lord (although an adult), God put me with an older Christian. For a time the two of us were inseparable, when I was not at work or with my family, I was with him. We ministered together, worked on projects together, and enjoyed a unique father-son type of relationship. Being saved a couple of years, I had a lot of opinions of Christian living (plus other baggage). In the course of our days together many situations would arise that prompted discussion. After giving my opinion on a matter, Don (my mentor's name) would say "to the table". Hammers would fall silent as all of us working would stop and go to whatever table we had to sit at. Don would reiterate the situation and restate my opinion. He would then say to me, "If you believe that, then what about this?" (and he would recite a verse of Scripture). Bibles would open around the table and we would study the passage.

He never told me what to believe or what he thought. It was always my opinion against the word of God. He would only bring up Scripture, and it became me versus the Bible. As I read the passages, the Holy Spirit would guide me in truth. The word of God cut through the heavy baggage (pride) I carried and taught me the way of righteousness. I matured in those two or three years with Don more that I could have at any Bible college. Don never said that he was "discipling me", or that he was my mentor, or that I was in a discipleship program. He was just a godly man that knew his Bible and the verses I needed for each situation we encountered.

So it is with prison Bible correspondence. It is not you who will teach anything to the inmate. It is God through the Holy Spirit who does the teaching. It is imperative that you know the voice of God. When you answer an inmate, it is not you, but God who answers them. You need to be in Christ and let the Holy Spirit guide you. Much in the same way a preacher writes a sermon, the message comes from God. The Lord has brought you together with an inmate, not because you have great spiritual insight or are a walking encyclopedia of Biblical facts, but because God can use you to reach that person. He can use you if you submit to Him and know His voice. He can use you if you understand that the inmate is your brother not your student.

So what do you have to offer the inmate? Hopefully nothing (less baggage for God to work through). Thanks to the internet, there are hundreds of Bible correspondence lessons available. What the inmate needs comes from the word of God. Your responsibility is two-fold. First, you are to have the right verses for the situations you encounter. Second, you are to minister those verses to the inmate effectively. Easier said than done?

Consider for a moment I Corinthians 14:1, "But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort." Now, before addressing the meat of the verse, the word "prophesieth" must be dealt with. Everyone has an opinion on the meaning of the word prophesy. Stop and verbalize your opinion of "prophesy". Now then, "If you believe that, what about I Corinthians 14:6?" Notice in verse 6 that revelation is different from knowledge which is different from prophesying which is different from doctrine. They are all different. Prophecy is different from revelation, or knowledge, or doctrine. Look at I Corinthians 14:24 "But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth." Notice that prophesy is for the unbelieving and the young in the faith. And that the result of prophesy is the revelation of the secrets of the heart (which we know is wicked; Jeremiah 17:9) and hopefully, repentance and confession to the acknowledging of the truth (II Timothy 2:25). Now look at I Corinthians 14:31, "For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted."

What do you conclude from this? Well, prophecy is not revelation, doctrine, or knowledge. It is a tool to reveal sin in the unbeliever. And it has the direct effect of learning and comfort. What else can you conclude? One who prophesies is a prophet. Oh boy, where is this going? Your theology may not allow for prophets in the Church Age. That is all right.

Unger's Bible Dictionary¹ in the section under Prophet (subheading: Prophetic Function) states:

The prophets had a practical office to discharge. It was part of their commission to show the people of God 'their transgressions and the house of Jacob their sins' (Isa 58:1; Ezek. 22:2; 43:10; Mic. 3:8). They were therefore pastors and ministerial monitors of the people of God. It was their duty to admonish and reprove, to denounce prevailing sins, to threaten the people with the terrors of divine judgment, and to call them to repentance. They also brought the message of consolidation and pardon (Isa. 40:1, 2). They were watchmen set upon the walls of Zion to blow the trumpet, and timely warning of approaching danger (Ezek. 3:17; 33:7, 8, 9; Jer. 6:17; Isa. 62:6).

So if your theology does not allow for prophets in the Church Age, then consider yourself a "ministerial monitor". These are the things you will do in Bible correspondence for a majority of inmates. If they are seeking a seminary degree or formal education, as a minimum, you must possess this yourself to be qualified. Prison-to-Praise International ministers to the student seeking a closer walk with Christ. Formal education is best left to that institution.

Notice the harshness of the words: admonish, denounce, threaten. In correspondence we are to esteem others better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). If so, then how do we convey the message of "admonish, denounce, threaten" without watering it down? For the answer let us consider our verse in I Corinthians. Look at the sequence set forth in I Corinthians 14:1, "edification, exhortation, and comfort." I have used this model in my correspondence. It has become the pattern of my letters for a very definite purpose. This is the key for handling Scripture.

"The word of God is powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword..." (Hebrews 4:12). You do not know the frame of mind of your reader at the moment he is reading your letter. Throw out a Scripture verse and you can cut somebody. Handle the word with caution. Correspondence is maybe one step below radio. Like radio, do not have the advantage of seeing your audience as you deliver the message. Unlike radio, you cannot interject inflection in your voice. Say you were going to the neighbor's house to complain about the noise they are making. You are about to let them have it when the door opens and someone is standing there with tears in their eyes. Are you going to deliver the same message? In the same tone of voice? Be careful, you do not know the present state of the inmate as he reads your letter.

Use the pattern the Lord has provided. First is edification. Commend them on something they wrote in the previous lesson. If that is not possible, start with a verse praising the Lord. Begin with a positive note but do not praise them flippantly. Second is exhortation. If you are going to correct them do it as if you were talking to your boss (I Tim 5:1). Esteem others better than yourself at all times. And third is comfort. Leave them with the assurance that the end of our pilgrimage is eternal life with Christ. Or for variety, let them know that you look forward to their continued correspondence.

¹Unger's Bible Dictionary, Chicago, Moody Press, 1974, p.891

Your life experiences and ministry gifts have already prepared you for this type of ministry (or you would not be reading this far). God may have orchestrated the events in your life to bring you to a prison Bible correspondence ministry. However you got here, your future effectiveness depends on your faith. Be like Solomon and when asked, ask God for an understanding heart.

The ***purpose*** of prison Bible correspondence is to guide the inmate in spiritual truth. In most cases he is weak in the flesh and has yielded to sin either through emotion or poor judgment. The ***goal*** is for the inmate to know and apply the word of God in his daily life; to be in His will. The ***end result*** of an effective prison Bible correspondence is a stronger stand against the devil and the flesh. I John 2:16-17 describes the temptations we all face,

*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.
And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.*

Below is an excerpt from a letter received from one of our brothers behind bars.

“Greeting’s to you! My name is _____. I am a student in your Bible Study Course. I am writing to you today because I have received unit 4 lesson 3. I can see what you were talking about (whose ambitions are not confined to your own selfish desires). I will consider making this a goal for the rest of the year. I am willing to go the second mile with the people God has in my life. This is not going to be an easy task for me, so please keep praying for me.”

To God be the Glory, great things He hath done.