

Frameworks of discipleship: Ideas for today, gained from the early Moravian church

by Frank Hottenbacher

The nature of discipleship

According to Vines,¹ a disciple “was not only a pupil, but an adherent; hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teachers.” This sets the disciple apart from the mere learner. A learner may or may not like or admire his teacher. The information to be gained is his objective; he is here to learn. A disciple, on the other hand, does not only follow the teaching but the life of the teacher. This necessitates several aspects which are not absolutely necessary in a pupil-teacher relationship:

- The teacher needs to share his life with the disciple and allow for a certain transparency on his side.
- The teacher must give a teaching that is “liveable”; a mere theory cannot be “followed” in this practical sense of discipleship.
- The disciple must honour and respect his teacher, being willing to not only learn but to imitate the way of life.

These few points make it quite obvious why such discipleship has not been the standard way of life in the history of the church. Transparency and sharing one’s life is a challenge to anyone in a position of responsibility and authority. Presenting a theory is also much easier than showing a workable model of living the Christian life. And thirdly, it is much easier for anyone to only consider the thoughts of a teacher than to actually follow his way of life.

In his commentary on Matthew², Robert H. Mounce writes,

The Greek verb mathēteuō means ‘to make a learner’. . . A disciple is not simply one who has been taught but one who continues to learn.

The process of life-long learning has long been embraced as a maxim of modern education and training. A disciple also must be one who keeps on learning. A disciple therefore is never “finished”. He may become “mature”, but a disciple of Jesus will only be finished with his process of learning once he has become one who is like the teacher in every regard.

Taking two principles from the above quotes, the nature of discipleship presents itself as:

- a process of life-long learning and change
- a process involving not only the embracing of a teaching but the adherence to the lifestyle of “my teacher”.

1 Vine's Amplified Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Iowa Falls, 1991, ISBN 0-529-10383-4, p.221

2 Mounce, Robert H. - New International Bible Commentary - Matthew, 1985,1991, ISBN 0-943575-18-4, p.268

This nature of discipleship is of course found in Jesus' words to his disciples "Follow me!"³ This is a direct call not only to follow his teaching but also to get up in the physical sense and actually follow in his footsteps, going where he goes, sleeping where he sleeps and sharing in his life as an itinerant teacher.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church."⁴ Paul was not shy of presenting himself as not only a teacher but as an example of the lifestyle of faith to the followers of Jesus Christ everywhere.

Ministers today struggle to exercise a similar confidence. It seems much safer to point the congregation to the example of Jesus, rather than to the example of the minister himself.

But however much a minister or pastor humbly turns the attention away from himself to Jesus, the congregation will still watch his or her example and draw their conclusions from what they see-- often more so than from what they have heard being preached on a Sunday.

"Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct,"⁵ is the formula in the letter to the Hebrews. Leaders and teachers in the church speak the word of God to the disciples, yet at the same time their faith can not only be comprehended or imitated; it can be "followed" and their life show a transparency which allows the congregation to see the "outcome of their conduct."

I think we can safely say that this kind of discipleship is largely missing in the church today. A young American Christian complains, "I was taught what Christians believe but nobody told me how Christians live."⁶ And church history, too, shows far more examples of how to teach and battle over correct doctrine than examples of humble servants using words and lifestyle to teach others how to live correctly.

Michael Wilcock is one of many voices expressing sadness and sorrow over the loss of authentic discipleship. Regarding the sending out of the disciples in Luke 9v.1-6 he comments,

How much of the activity of the Christian communities to which we belong falls under the condemnation of being deficient in one respect, overblown in another, when compared with the kind of community the Lord here calls his disciples to be? With regard to the world, we try to impress it with our success or social importance, when our great concern should be to evangelize it. Within the church we strive for bureaucratic efficiency and economic security, when our real aim should be its growth into spiritual maturity. As for the cross, we do indeed bear it publicly-- as a necessary feature of our church buildings, or as an ornament round our neck, or

3 Mark 1,16-18 NKJV

4 1 Corinthians 4,16-17 NKJV

5 Hebrews 13,7 NKJV

6 Claiborne, Shane- The irresistible revolution, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2006

(more importantly) as the heart of the message we preach. But that is not enough. We are meant to be bearing it to a daily crucifixion at our personal Calvary.⁷

How refreshing when one finds an example in history that shows us a model how it could (and can) be done.

Frameworks of discipleship in the early Moravian Church in Herrnhut, Saxony

My family and I moved to Herrnhut in 2005. We were to pastor a small congregation in this country town of 1400 people in the east of Germany, formerly a communist-governed country for the four decades following World War II. Living there, we were soon confronted with its rich spiritual inheritance and had to learn quickly what we could about the history of the Moravian church, as every visitor to the church expected the pastor to be an expert in all matters Moravian, historical and other otherwise. Though I certainly cannot claim to have become such an expert, the reading of some of the historical material has proved to be a source of inspiration. In regard to discipleship, the early Moravian church especially found many innovative ways to make disciples.

The concept, "frameworks of discipleship", has described to my mind, and also to the probing questions of visitors, the lessons to be learned from Moravian history.

Any true discipleship is an interaction between one who teaches and shows an example and one who follows this example. Each interaction requires a setting. A setting can be the classroom, or the Sunday morning sermon, or a one-on-one conversation. When we think of "discipleship" these days, we mostly seem to think of a one-on-one conversation. "Mentoring" has become a synonym for the word "discipleship". Jesus, however, did not engage in much of this type of discipleship. His disciples are mainly mentioned in groups of various sizes: 12, 70, 500 or thousands who listened to his teaching.

The setting for discipleship becomes a "framework of discipleship" when it is an intentional and organised structure which a church develops in order to offer a broad range of discipleship opportunities to its members. This the Moravian church did with amazing creativity.

From the earliest days of Herrnhut, a remarkable spiritual fervour marked this settlement of refugees from neighbouring Moravia and Bohemia. Their Sunday meetings in the Lutheran church in nearby Bethelsdorf were not just limited to an hour or two.

On a Sunday the congregational meetings carried on from six o'clock in the morning until 12 at night. Early in the morning we attended church. I [Zinzendorf] gave out the songs. While the singing commenced I went with Herr Rothe to the sacristy.⁸ After the confession of faith was sung, he tore

7 Wilcock, Michael/ Stott, John ed. - The Bible Speaks Today - The Message of Luke, Leicester, UK; Downers Grove Illinois, USA, 1979; ISBN 0-85110-733-8, p.108

⁸ Side room in traditional churches, reserved for the clergy.

himself away from me and ran to the pulpit and spoke in two hours what others might not have been able to say in five. After church the Moravians did not go home, but each had a piece of bread in their coat pocket. Then followed the instruction of the children and when this was finished, I sat with Herr Rothe in front of the altar and we held a colloquium⁹, and whoever had something to say, said it from the pew or from their seat in the balconies."¹⁰

The colloquium was followed by the "Singstunde", an hour of prayer and hymn-singing. Thereafter the church moved on to meet in the nearby house of Count Zinzendorf, where the count elaborated on the morning's sermon. They met as "Ecclesiola in ecclesia", as a "little church within the church". Their aim was to renew the fervour of the Lutheran church, acting as a leaven in the lump. ¹¹

Even at this early stage the beginnings of a "framework of discipleship" is recognisable. The church did not just meet in one setting, i.e., the Sunday morning service. In addition to the service they also taught the children and had an hour of singing hymns, which were actually systematic and practical theology set to tunes. The colloquium and the meeting at Zinzendorf's house aimed to make sure that the simple farmers as well as attending nobility could apply the sermon to their lives, thus "making disciples" rather than attendants at church meetings. One common aim ties all the facets together: the church must be renewed, the gospel life must be evident in the members, and faith must be more than a dogma-- it is to be the rule of life.

Listing the different settings, we find:

- the church service with extended preaching time
- instruction for the younger generation
- the colloquium
- the singing hour
- the house meeting

Altogether there were five different settings, which all had one aim in common: the growing maturity of the believers and their joy in their faith. Compare this to your church today. How many settings does your church offer and does the depth of practical application match that of this Lutheran church in Berthelsdorf in 1722?

As the settlement in Herrnhut grew and developed, despite various conflicts, into a radical example of renewed church life, other forms and settings were developed to increase the overall impact of "disciple making". I believe the list is an inspiration for today. If we can be similarly creative in creating settings and frameworks of discipleship, we too can expect the vitality of new life in our churches. I, for one, am very keen on that!

9 Informal gathering to discuss the teaching

10 Beyreuther, Erich - Zinzendorf und die sich allhier zusammen finden, Marburg 1957, p.82

11 Geiger, Erika - Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf, seine Lebensgeschichte, Holzgerlingen, Hänssler Verlag 1991, ISBN 3-7751-2839-5, p.110

Various settings aiding discipleship in Herrnhut (1722-1760)

“Die Statuten” (The Statutes)

The year 1727 was a very important one for the Moravian Church. On the twelfth of May, Zinzendorf released a document commonly called “The Statutes”, which consisted of two parts: “Herrschaftliche Gebote und Verbote” (Lordly Rules and Regulations) and “Brüderlicher Verein und Willkür” (Brotherly Agreement and Firm Decision). The document was developed by Count Zinzendorf, Pastor Rothe and other members of the community and was to govern the life of the new settlement and its church. Zinzendorf had the governmental right to pass ordinances for the population who were living on his lands. This he did in part 1 which was a “Do’s and don’t’s” list for all who had settled in Herrnhut. Part 2 of the document was addressed primarily to the Christian church.¹²

The statutes proved highly effective in creating a generally accepted framework for all and proved to aid the process of unity. From this date on, one rule governed all who lived in the town and issues could be settled in a satisfactory manner with the aid of the statutes.

Part 2 made it very clear who was to be considered a Christian. All who met the criteria mentioned in Zinzendorf’s statement were seen as true Christians and it created a clear dividing line among the many doctrinal viewpoints among the Christians in Herrnhut.

Anyone who does not confess that the pure mercy of God in Christ has taken hold of him and also confesses himself unable to be without such mercy for even so much as a moment; also that even the greatest perfection in life, were it able to obtain such without Jesus, should it be founded on anything but the blood and merit of Christ's intercession, would be entirely without benefit before God. However, if such perfection done in Christ, then it does please God. Besides this he shows daily that he has made a complete earnest of the renouncing of sin, for which Christ suffered and being one who looks to God to take the sin away, so that he might be purer and more like the first image of God, freed of all impurities attached to the natural life. If in this he does not put away all vanity, self-will, and walks as Jesus walked, bearing his shame, he is truly no brother.¹³

Defining how one became a “brother”, or how one remained one, is of course foundational to any discipleship which exhibits itself in concrete lifestyle. The statutes declared clearly what was expected of every member of the community and thus created a framework of discipleship comparable to the words of the apostle Paul, “imitate me.”¹⁴

In this case, the imitation was not directly linked to the lifestyle of one person, but rather an ordinance was given that governed the everyday life of the whole community. This unusual document fulfilled a similar role to the Rule in the

¹² Geiger, Erika, Nikolaus Ludwig... p.120-122

¹³ Quote taken from "Brüderlicher Verein und Willkür" printed in: Hahn, Hans-Christoph und Reichel, Helmut ed. - Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüder, Friedrich Wittig, Hamburg 1977, p.75

¹⁴ I Cor. 4:16

monastic orders. But this time the rule was not for a monastic community; it was a rule for simple farm workers, labourers and craftsmen who were engaged in the pursuits of everyday life. Under the authority of the Bible, with Pastor Rothe's sermons and with Zinzendorf's tireless efforts at explaining, applying and exhorting, the whole town was brought under a practical programme of Christian discipleship.

“Die Banden” (Bands of Brothers)

Although the whole church had signed and agreed to the statutes, life in Herrnhut still lacked brotherly love and openness. To combat this, the count instituted what was called the “band”.¹⁵ The term was borrowed from the musical world, a band being a small group of musicians who played together in harmony. The purpose of the band was to strengthen the relationships in the church and give an opportunity to “confess your trespasses one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”¹⁶

*The purpose which we seek to achieve in our band meetings is that we might get to know all souls well, inside and out . . . In our bands we will look deeper, asking one another in turn how it is with his or her heart, and how have they grown or diminished.*¹⁷

This method of inquiry by the so-called “Bandenhalter” (band leader) found its way into Methodism some years later in London and became one of the distinguishing marks of the Methodist class meetings. John Wesley was a member of the “Fetter Lane Society” in which it was agreed that:

*1. They will meet together once a week, to confess their faults to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed. . . 3. That the persons desirous to meet together for that purpose be divided into several bands or little societies . . . 5. That some one in each band be desired to interrogate the rest in order, who may be called the leader of the band.*¹⁸

I wonder how many would be attracted today to attend a meeting where they will be “interrogated” in order for them “to confess their faults one to another”. But the practise proved itself a wonderful community-builder in the years to come. Even in the most remote missionary placements of the Moravian church, the practise of asking heart-searching questions was one of the keys of communal life.

In Herrnhut, the band meetings continued to become the backbone of the community life. Love for one's brother seems to become a reality when it is accompanied by openness. The band meetings were times for heart-searching questions, not times of teaching. In the band meeting, each brother is in the main a sinner, seeking help from his fellow believers and asking for their prayer. Meetings on this level enabled the brotherly love which marked the believers in Herrnhut.

15 Geiger, Erika - Nikolaus Ludwig..., p.124

16 James 5,16a, NKJV

17 Hahn/ Reichel - Zinzendorf ... , p.82

18 Unitäts Archiv Herrnhut, NB I R.3.275 - The Moravian Society, Fetter Lane - London, in: Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society, Vol. XVII/ Part 2, 1929, p.29

Der Chor (Choir Meeting)

After establishing the band meetings, Zinzendorf experimented with assigning each member of the community to a group that would match their spiritual progress. Initially the groups were divided into 5 different levels: the unregenerate, the awakened but yet sinful, the slovenly, the young and growing Christian, and the mature Christian.

This division proved unworkable, as it led to spiritual competition of the worst kind; it prevented openness and fostered the party spirit which had caused so much division before 1727.

The groups were re-formed, this time with the picture of an orchestra in mind. They were named "choirs". In the years to come, an increasingly specialised number of choirs were formed. There were choirs for the unmarried men, for unmarried women, also for married men and married women. The latter later subdivided into choirs for nursing mothers, mothers with toddlers, etc. Zinzendorf instituted choirs for widows and widowers, and at the height of the diversity in choirs, Herrnhut had 25 different types of choirs in which members met for prayer, for scripture instruction and encouragement fitting their particular situation.¹⁹

The choir was a place to meet, and often also a place where handicrafts were practised, as idleness was generally frowned upon and industry counted a true Christian value. As time went by, the individual choirs built houses for the choir and thus became not only a time of meeting during the week, but true community households with their own structures for effective discipleship.

“Die Ermahner” (Ministry of Exhortation)

Zinzendorf had gone from house to house, visiting the members of the new settlement, prior to the changes in their communal life in 1727. He was a gifted counsellor and succeeded in reconciling many who had had sectarian tendencies. After instituting the bands and the choirs, the house-to-house visiting was not to be neglected. But the ministry of encouraging and exhorting one another was no longer only exercised by the count or Pastor Rothe. Authority was given to some members of the community to become “Ermahner” (exhorters). This was new ministry which required particular character; they were to work in two different roles. One person was appointed who was gifted in spotting the faults in others. This person was then given the task to speak to another member of the community who was very gentle in nature; this gentle character in turn had the task to visit in the home and seek to encourage or exhort the brother to change their ways.²⁰

“Ermahner” persons were chosen who had the gift to remind with a compassionate and merciful heart, and doing this with both friendliness and earnestness. They were to keep in mind what the Saviour rightfully might expect of His redeemed ones, but on the other hand be very mindful of the

19 Hahn/ Reichel - Zinzendorf..., p.250-258

20 Hahn/ Reichel - Zinzendorf ..., p.84

weakness and poverty of their brothers with heartfelt mercy. In this way they were to achieve that exhortation would be received to bring healing and were to persuade the erring members of the church without creating new reasons for strife.²¹

The joint effect of band meetings, choir houses and the individual ministry of the exhorters led to a very high level of personal discipleship. No one in Herrnhut could remain in any doubt as to what the Saviour might “rightfully expect of his redeemed ones.” With the continuing ministry of the Word and through services, prayer and singing hours, and other meetings, the early Moravian church disciplined its members no less than the most intensive monastic order had ever managed. The Moravians did it, however, without withdrawing from the world, taking up vows, or binding its members to their communal lifestyle.

Die Losung (Daily Parole/Watchword)

On the third of May 1728, Zinzendorf introduced yet another idea to the congregation. Just as the commander of an army gives out a parole (watchword) to his officers so that they might recognise each other and be able to pass through the guard posts, so Zinzendorf gave out a scripture or verse from a song to the church for the coming day. As these were chosen by lot (German: “Los”), they become known as the “Losung”.

On this first evening, the Losung for the next day was, “Love has driven him to come to me/Love tore him from heaven's throne/Should not I then love him as my own?”²²

This added a new dimension to the house visitations. A brother was appointed each day to go from house to house in the morning and pass out the daily parole. By visiting everyone in the community in this way, he had ample opportunity to hear about their concerns, pray with them and encourage all who needed a cheering word. That evening, when the church gathered for a time of prayer and intercession, the brother who had spread the daily parole in the morning was able to inform the congregation and ask for their prayer on behalf of those in need.

Since the year 1731, the Losung words for each day of the year have been printed in a booklet. The Moravian Church today continues the practise of drawing the year's worth of scriptures by lot, and also drawing lots for a “Jahreslosung”, a word for the whole year. In any given year, the Jahreslosung is probably the most-used sermon text in the whole of the German-speaking church. Although the practise of spreading the Losung from house to house has long ceased, the current edition is printed in 50 languages. In Germany alone, more than a million copies are circulated each year. The blessing of Zinzendorf's idea continues to encourage countless believers around the world to this day. In the early days of the Moravian church in Herrnhut, it was another tool in their varied array of discipleship settings.

Singing as a Training Tool

21 Cröger, E.W - Geschichte der erneuerten Brüderkirche, Erster Theil, Gnadau, Leipzig 1852, p.127

22 Geiger, Erika - Zinzendorf ... p.140

Singing was always an important part of the church, especially so as Zinzendorf composed many songs or sang impromptu in the gatherings. He is quoted in the introduction to the 1927 hymnbook:

*This no one should say: that it is the same thing whether a brother speaks (even if his speaking is excellent) or whether a people are singing to their king out of a full heart with one mouth and with the nearness of the Holy Spirit . . . For one finds all over the world people who like to listen, but those who love to sing and play for their Lord out of dedication and who do not tire of doing so for years, those one does not find easily. But only among those who belong to Him, especially in the churches, have they this privilege. . . This the great purpose and desire of our Singing Hours and Liturgies, that the Holy Spirit himself should direct, be the song leader and give the right tone to this concert. . .*²³

Zinzendorf was not only very fond of singing, but he also knew to make use of the songs as a vehicle for discipleship. The earliest hymnbooks contained nearly 2000 songs, most of which the permanent members of the congregation knew by heart. In their Singing Hours they had the custom of singing without the use of hymnbooks, connecting verses from various songs, thus making it necessary to know most songs by heart in order to participate. In contrast to the Lutheran hymnbook, which was ordered by the ecclesiastical calendar, the Moravian hymnbook was subdivided by subject matter and covered matters both of faith and conduct. One can only imagine what effect 2000 memorised songs, full of good teaching, can have on a believer. The custom to conduct the singing hour in this manner continued long after Zinzendorf's death, and is still practised today, although the congregation nowadays is no longer expected to know all songs by heart.

*We have this custom in our daily Singing Hours that we never use whole songs but rather connect verses from various songs which deal with the same subject matter, and sing them with all our heart. This keeps our singing lively and allows the song theology to penetrate more readily into the hearts than the singing of whole songs, which all too easily can make the singing a mechanical and sleepy affair. . . This custom to connect one or more verses from various songs has always been peculiar to the Moravian church from its early days onwards, so that the subject matter forms a kind of sung sermon; and as this continues to have blessed results, we see much reason to continue this custom.*²⁴

Applications for today's church

In writing this, I am both inspired and unsettled. It is a stirring example to think of a church that managed to make disciples out of ordinary men and women. Within a few decades the church in Herrnhut not only increased in size but also in influence. They became a model church for many other believers, and new

²³ Evangelische Brüderunität: Gesangbuch der evangelischen Brüdergemeine, 3. Auflage, Hamburg 1927 - Einleitung zum Gesangbuch 1927

²⁴ Evangelische Brüderunität: Gesangbuch zum Gebrauch der evangelischen Brüder-Gemeinen, Barby 1805, p.3-4

settlements according the Herrnhut model were established all over the globe. A church of a few hundred members in remote Saxony became an inspiration and source of blessing to countless believers, with their influence continuing to this day in many nations. How I wish that this was the norm in today's church!

In Christian circles the Moravians are known for their missionary efforts, for their practise of 24-hour prayer or for their early stance of ecumenical unity among the churches. Many know of the unusual events of 13 August 1727 when the Holy Spirit brought a new level of love and life into their midst. One could also add that they were unusual for their time in their positive stance towards women in ministry, towards Jews, or toward people of a different skin colour. All of this would be true. But much of the success of their endeavours is due to the fact that they managed to institute structures of discipleship. Without this, the blessings of the Spirit might have been lost like a rain on sandy soil. With these, the blessings were channelled and used to water the life of their church. Without the frameworks of discipleship, disunity or sinful behaviour in the congregation would have destroyed the hopeful beginnings of the summer of 1727.

In today's churches, some efforts are being made to make disciples, to teach more than doctrine and to regain the common ground of a Christian lifestyle. But we are comparatively poor when it comes to creativity in discipleship. We don't use our songs as effectively as the early Moravians did. By the way, how many hymns do you know by heart? And another question: do you ever get bored or sleepy during worship meetings in your church?

We have no church member coming to our house in the morning with an encouraging word from the scriptures or to invite us to the next choir meeting, which will bring us together with like-minded people. When last did you have a "colloquium" in your church, with the pastor and the co-pastor sitting by the altar while all were able to ask questions and discuss the day's sermon? Have you ever been to something like a band meeting, where someone dared to ask you, "And how have you sinned, dear brother, since we last saw you? Tell us honestly, no one among us can cast the first stone!" Has someone ever come to your house to encourage you to live up to the expectations of your Saviour?

I think I know your answer, as none of these are common today. But are they outdated? I really don't think so. Certainly the forms, the language, the times and frequency of the meetings might need to be adjusted to our modern lifestyle, but the principles remain valid. Therefore, let us seek out fresh ideas to increase the variety of discipleship settings, to create a framework of discipleship in your church. The world is still waiting to see Christians who are truly alive!