Soul Care in the context of Christian Discipleship

Paul Choi, St. Louis UBF

Discipleship in Christianity is one of the most essential tasks and goals according to the teaching of Christ. In his greatest commission Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations.(Mt 28:19). He also taught them that those who hold to his teaching will be his real disciples and that they may know the truth which sets them free. (Jn 8:31,32) Indeed, Jesus himself focused on discipleship during his messianic period amid serving the crowds and the needy. What, then, is discipleship in Christianity? The word ‘disciple’ comes from ‘discipline’, that disciple means those who are instructed and trained by and from those who are superior. In a word discipleship in Christianity is to raise those who are disciplined by teaching of Jesus or by certain programs or system to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

It has been always big challenges to those who are positioned to plan and exercise the discipleship program because discipleship is not a simple and easy task. It is so complicated and time-consuming project which requires long term study and full time devotion. It is not just change of character or development of EQ or conflict resolution, but a total package of soul care. As Margaret Kornfeld said in her book “*Cultivating Wholeness*”, it requires wholeness network which include nurturing, healing, counseling, and caring supported from persons, families, groups, religious community, ministry, and all related groups. In a word discipleship is a total packaged developing program and combined inner artwork so that Christians may be thoroughly equipped to do the task that Christ desired. (2 Ti 3:17)

Since discipleship requires such a multi-dimensional process: physical, mental, and spiritual, our viewpoint to see disciple candidates and the way of approach them should be multi-angled and inter-related. God created each person special and unique. There is no the exactly same person in this world, not even one. So, our attitude and mindset to lead the candidates into discipleship program could be very diverse and flexible according to their personality and differences of their human condition. If we put all of them in a uniformed system or premade program or approach them with psychological intention for the sake of EQ development or mental progress, we soon face limitation and confrontation which come from this structural diversity. Men are body, soul, and spirit. We have to enlarge our dimension until we see all with three dimensional angles.

In this respect we call ‘soul care’ for ‘a person care’ because soul represents a person. When we say ‘care’, we are supposed to have those who need ‘care.’ They are generally called student, disciple candidate, or sheep. They are those who need spiritual, mental, physical care and support in order to be disciples of Jesus. Their past and present condition are categorized in Biblical terms: they are lost sheep, sick with sin, dead or dying spiritually, fall apart from God, blind in darkness, ignorant from the truth, and so on. So, our mission is to find them, heal them, save them, guide them, open their eyes to see God, and teach them with the truth, and so on.

We have many ways to help those who are in need spiritually and mentally. We correct them according to God’s law in the Old Testament, especially through the Ten Commandments. All Scriptures are God-breathed, so it is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training. We also recommend them to listen to famous pastors’ sermons and lectures from YouTube or to read good spiritual books. We bring them to Christian counselors or mentors. We also encourage them by sharing our own testimonies and experiences. Despite all these efforts and ways we confront limitation unless their inner self, their essential nature, are not changed into the image of Christ. Our goal is to help them to imitate the image of Christ Jesus as Paul claimed. (Eph 5:1)

Because our goal for soul care in discipleship is to raise them as disciples of Jesus, we find answers for all of them above from John’s gospel: for the lost sheep is to lead them to Jesus, the good shepherd (Jn 10:11), for the sick with sin is to be healed by Jesus’ love (Jn 5:8), for the dying spiritually is to hear Jesus’ voice (Jn 5:24), for those who are fallen apart from God is to remain in Jesus (Jn 15:5), for the blind in darkness is to follow the light of the world, Jesus (Jn 8:12), for those who are ignorant from the truth is to help them to hold on Jesus’ teaching (Jn 8:32). We summarize in this:

Condition: Mission Solution

* The lost sheep: find them: lead them to the shepherd, Jesus
* sick with sin: heal them: healed by Jesus’ love
* dying spiritually save them: hear the voice of Jesus
* Fallen apart guide them: remain in Jesus
* Blind in darkness: open their eyes: follow the light of the world Jesus
* Ignorant from the truth: teach them: Hold on Jesus’ teaching

Imitating Jesus Christ is the focal point in the discipleship. Following his footstep as a shepherd, teacher, counselor, friend, and mentor is crucial in forming peoples’ life into the original image which before men had been corrupted. Indeed Jesus did two main things as the Messiah: to *save* and to *restore*. Jesus saved his people from their sins through his death and resurrection. He saved us from the penalty of sin, which is death (Ro 6:23b), the power of sin (Ro 8:2), and the presence of sin (Gal 2:20,1Pe 1:3,4). Jesus also came to restore our original image of God from all defects and affliction caused from the result of sin through his mercy and power. He restored the eyes of a born blind man (Mk 8:22, Jn 9:7), healed lepers (Mk 1:42, Lk 5:13), raised the paralytics (Mk 2:1-12, Jn 5:1-11), opened ears and mouth from a deaf and mute man (Mk 7:31-37), drove out evil spirits from the demon-possessed men (Mk 9:14-29, Lk 8:26-39), and gave new life to the dead men. (Lk 8:54, Jn 11:43)

In terms of gospel, soul care is a restoring process for original image of God in men’s heart through faith and love of Christ Jesus. In the beginning God created men in his own image and likeness. (Ge 1:27,2:7) After God created men, he said, “It is very good!” (Ge 1:31). This means that the perfect God made the perfect creature, a human being, without any defect. But sin made men sick and dead. All deformities came from the result of sin. Why blindness? Why leprosy? Why paralysis? Why demon-possession? Men lost the image of God because of sin. Now Jesus came to restore all afflicted and defected human beings. By his precious blood and powerful resurrection Jesus healed us from sin-sickness and all diseases. Isaiah the prophet prophesied, “*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,.. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed*” (Is 53:4,5)

What is the image of God and his likeness? He is holy, loving, gracious, compassionate, merciful, faithful, powerful, creative, and so on. Therefore, we should be as holy as Jesus, as humble and gentle as Jesus, as gracious and compassionate as Jesus, as merciful and loving as Jesus, as faithful as Jesus. If we all restore these original images of God, we don’t need Jesus. But sin disfigured these images of God in our heart and destroyed our relationship with him. The disfigured men caused by sin have to pay the price of sin and suffer under the power of sin. Why do we need soul care? This is because men lost the paradise and they are inherited all sin-stained blood which caused all physical affliction and mental distortion.

Teaching, counseling, mentoring, shepherding, supervising, etc, all these are the ways of soul care which are practiced in discipleship. Jesus did all these combined when he disciplined his disciples. Jesus repeated his teachings so that they might not forget. Jesus counseled them who is truly great in the kingdom of God when they were struggling among themselves. Jesus showed them how to love one another by washing their feet at the very night he was arrested. Jesus visited his disciples after he rose again when they went back to catch fish at their hometown. Jesus was humble and gentle while he was with them. Jesus showed his perfect example how to shepherd them with the love of God. Based on Jesus’ exemplary life and teaching we learn how to care others and succeed our discipleship in our ministry and church.

1. With great patience and careful instructions (2 Ti 4:2)

In his second pastoral letter to Timothy, his young disciple, who became in charge of the church of Ephesus, Apostle Paul wrote: “*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*” (2 Ti 4:2) The work of correcting, rebuking, and encouraging are the methods of caring and shepherding, especially disciplining to be disciples of Jesus. We cannot change anyone by our own knowledge and experience. We must depend on the Scriptures which is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training. (2 Ti 3:16) Even though we use the Scriptures for disciplining them, it is not a simple task. As I mentioned above, men are very different and diverse, so we must approach them with multi-dimension angles. In this verse Paul said to Timothy to serve them with great patience and careful instruction. Patience is long suffering self-control with positive expectation. It is one of the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5:22) This means we easily lose patience when we follow our fleshly desire. Paul said, “*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*.” (Gal 5:16)

Timothy was a young pastor of the church in Ephesus. Some might look down on him and would not listen to him simply because he was young. (1Ti 4:12) As we read Ephesians, there were many false teachings and Judiasers. It was not easy at all for Timothy to handle all these problems in the church within and out. So, Paul urged Timothy to be patient with them. Patience is not a passive self-denial, but an active self-control, expecting positive future result. Jesus was patient with Nicodemus who stubbornly counter-questioned about being born again. (Jn 3). Jesus was patient with a Samaritan woman who was defiant against his spiritual favor. Jesus was patient with his disciples who were spiritually dull and slowed to understand.

When people lose their patience, they become anxious and furious. So, in discipleship anger management is one of essential task to the trainer and the trainee. According to Gary Chapman, anger is also one of images of God. But it should be for good reasons. Generally anger produces negative and destruction impact and result. So, Paul explained that self-control is also one of nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5:23) In his book ‘*Anger, handling a powerful emotion in a healthy way’*, Gary Chapman emphasizes the importance of listening to angry person. He wrote: “*the best thing you can do for an angry person is to listen to his story…When you listen to him, you are respecting his right to be angry*…” In fact, when we listen to an angry person, while we are listening why he became angry, he himself will calm down or find solution to get out of his anger. The real problem is that we won’t listen to angry people, but blame them before we understand their reason for anger.

In building up healthy relationship in discipleship program anger management is very important. Many pastors, mentors, or counselors fail in establishing a healthy relationship with their members or students or coworkers because they fail in anger management. They have to become aware of their anger and learn how to handle with angry people. How did Jesus handle with angry Pharisees and teachers of the law when they were humiliated by Jesus’ words? Jesus didn’t respond to them right away. He listened to them. He waited until they finished their accusation. Then, Jesus responded them with great patience and careful instruction. Jesus did not lose his temper, but rebuked them when they were defiant. (Jn 8:1-11)

1. Restore that person gently (Gal 6:1) When we find someone caught in sinning, we have tendency to judge them. Some treat them harshly according by their self-righteousness. When we approach these kinds of people, we must come to them with compassion and mercy rather than with judging mind and criticizing spirit. In John 8:1-11 when a woman who had been caught in act of adultery was brought by the Jewish religious leaders, how did Jesus treat her? The religious leaders condemned her as an adulterous woman and treated her like a mad dog. They were ready to stone her to death according to Moses’ law. But, Jesus didn’t condemn her. Rather, he forgave her and set her free from the life of sin. (Jn 8:11-12) While Jesus was on the way to Galilee, he met a Samaritan woman who had five husbands and lived a new boy friend. Jesus knew that she was a sinful woman. But he did not condemn her or criticize her sinful life. Rather, he had compassion her and helped her to drink the living water welling up to eternal life. (Jn 4:13-14) Jesus was humble and gentle when he helped the needy people. He was not harsh or proud when he met the sinners. Rather, he was humble and gentle as he said in Matthew 11:29.

Gentleness is also one of the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit along with patience and self-control according to Galatians 5:23. Apostle Paul said to the believers in the church of Galatia in this, “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently*…” Some say that gentleness is one of born characters given by God. That might be partially true, still gentleness can be obtained from constant spiritual discipline. As Paul said in 1Timothy 4:4, we should train ourselves to be godly for the glory of God and for the interests of others. When we deny ourselves in terms of formatting the image of Christ and learn how to manage our anger and practice Christ’s love for sinners, our inner character will be changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot change ourselves, but when we earnestly seek for God’s help, the Holy Spirit can change us from violent man from gentle man, from proud man to humble man, and from angry man to peaceful man.

Proverbs 15:1 says, “*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*.” In 2 Chronicles 10:1-15 the king of Judah Rehoboam consulted the elders of his kingdom about the request of Jeroboam, who had returned from Egypt and suggested his submission on condition of the reduce of hard labor on his people. The elders counseled the king to treat them gently as Jeroboam had asked. But the young men who had grown up with the king counseled him opposite. They counseled the king to treat Jeroboam and his people harshly. Later this wrong counsel caused the rebellion of Jeroboam against the king and the division of Israel. When those who bring difficult questions or problems with disturbed spirit, we have to be ready to accept them as they are. We have to respect them as God’s precious children and see them with the eye of compassion. Because of our gentle and humble attitude the angry people may be comforted and they might calm down before they bring their issues. Moreover our truthful and compassionate words may resolve all confrontation in their hearts. Pastors, mentors, counselors, and all those who participate in Christian discipleship must learn how to be humble and gentle like Jesus before they counsel their students and clients.

1. With humility (Php 2:3)

When Dr. Billy Graham was asked about his leadership by a reporter, he answered, “First is humility, second is humility, and third also is humility.” Rev. Graham emphasized the importance of humility in his ministry and his personal career as an evangelist. Paul the Apostle counseled the believers in the church of Philppi to be humble as Christ was. “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*” (Php 2:3-5) People say that humility is to deny our pride and suppress self-ego. This is partially true. But, in Philippians Paul defined humility as to value others above ourselves. In the old version it is interpreted as to consider others better than ourselves. In other words we acknowledge other’s right as the one who has the image of God. More than this we consider everybody as teachers by approaching them with learning mind. Indeed, everybody in this world was made unique and special by God. So we can learn something from anyone even from little children. When we have such learning mind and respectful attitude toward others, there will be no conflicts among couples, coworkers, and peers. Conflicts arise among those who think themselves better than others. So, Jesus rebuked his disciples who were arguing among themselves who is the greatest. Then he brought a little child and said that they would not enter the kingdom of God unless they are like little children and take the lowly position of the child. (Mt 18:1-5, Mk 10:13-16)

One of the best ways to build up a good relationship in discipleship is listening to others. Listening to others is not a prejudicial listening, which means to listen to what we like to hear, but to listen to all problems, agonies, even complaining of others. Dr. Michael Nichols said in this book “*The Lost Art of Listening*”, “Being listened means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are recognized, and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.” In fact when we are listened to, we feel ourselves respected and recognized by the listeners. Many pastors or mentors fail to listening to those who came to them for counseling because they will not listen to them. Instead of listening they teach or give them advice first. Being listened brings more understanding as well as information. Understanding establishes a good relationship and makes friendship among the listener and the talker. Dr. Nichols said that friendship grows with mutual disclosure. While, the more talking and the more listening, their trust relationship becomes deepened and friendship solid.

We learn how Jesus counseled a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4. When Jesus started a conversation with her, her response was defiant. She rejected Jesus’ offer. She wanted to be alone, not wanting to talk with anyone even from the stranger Jesus. But Jesus humbled himself in order to open her heart. Jesus listened to her story with patience and sincerity. Little by little she began to open her heart through her conversation with Jesus. She realized that Jesus knew her and understood her inner problem. Their conversation became deeper and personal. Finally, she opened her heart and asked Jesus for her spiritual help. Here we learn how Jesus dealt her assertive and offensive denial with his great patience. Jesus knew what kind of woman she was, still waited until she opened her heart and talked about her problem-husband and thirst- to Jesus. She must have been moved by Jesus’ sincere heart and humility. Humility opens hardened heart. Listening with patience saves life as Jesus showed in the book of John.

1. By the help of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)

Because a man is consists of body, soul, and spirit, the help of the Holy Spirit in Christian discipleship is essential and vital. As I mentioned above, there is limitation in helping and molding distorted person into a man with right mind by psychological and medical approach. We need the power of God who can change such a person fundamentally. Paul the Apostle said to Titus, a young pastor in the church of Crete in his letter, “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*” (Tit 3:5) Paul acknowledged the power and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit in changing sinners into saints. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of power and wisdom. In John’s gospel Jesus introduced the Holy Spirit as the one who will guide people into the truth. (Jn 16:13) The Holy Spirit makes sinners born again. (Jn 3:5) Jesus said that we must be born again of water and of the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes on, people change. Peter was a fearful man. Out of fear he disowned Jesus three times. But after receiving the Holy Spirit, Peter was changed into a powerful witness of Jesus Christ. In front of the hostile crowds he delivered the message of Jesus fearlessly and powerfully. (Ac 2:41) This is the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we counsel someone or encourage them to grow as disciples of Jesus, we must ask the guidance and work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Another Counselor and Advocate. (Jn 14:16,26,15:26) He will remind us of all that Jesus taught us in the Scripture. He will go ahead of us and correct wrongness in the world. He will answer our prayer and work for transformation and sanctification. We must humble ourselves to depend on the Holy Spirit in our discipleship. Apostle Paul humbly depended on the Holy Spirit and followed its direction. He also encouraged the saints to walk with the Holy Spirit and to live with the Holy Spirit. (Gal 5:16) He rebuked the saints in Ephesus not to be drunken, but filled with the Holy Spirit. (Eph 5:18)

The goal for Christian discipleship is to imitate Jesus Christ and to bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23) When we bear such fruits of the Holy Spirit, we don’t need any psychiatrists or mental hospitals because we restore the image of Jesus. We are healthy spiritually, mentally, and physically by bearing the fruits of the Holy Spirit. So, we must encourage our students, members, disciples to bear fruits of the Holy Spirit through their godly training and discipleship program. How can we bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit? How can we become humble and gentle like Jesus? How can we become faithful and lovely like Jesus? We can bear fruits of the Holy Spirit when we remain in Jesus. Jesus said in John 15:5, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*.” We are his branches and Jesus is the vine. When we remain in the vine Jesus, we can bear his fruits, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Apart from him we can do nothing. In fact all human tragedy and suffering came from the separation from God. Human beings who are separated from God wandered and suffered. Death and disease came from the curse of God due to our sins. (Ge 3:14-19) When we remain in Jesus, we are restored. We are healed and restored physically, mentally, and spiritually.

In conclusion pastors, mentors, teachers, and counselors have to see their members, students, coworkers as God’s precious creatures, who are lost and disfigured because of their sin. They are lost sheep who need shepherds. With the eyes of God’s compassion and the mindset of Christ we must take care of them as a whole world. We have to listen to them until they trust us. Above all we must depend on the Holy Spirit who will lead them into truth and grow them to bear fruits, the fruit of Christ Jesus.

Reference:

**The Holy Bible (NIV)**

**Anger (Handling A Powerful Emotion In a Healthy Way)**: Gary Chapman

**The Lost Art of Listening**: Michael P. Nicholas

**Emotional Intelligence for Religious Leaders**: John Lee West, Roy M. Oswald, Nadyne Guzman

**Boundaries**: Henry Cloud & John Townsend

**Creating a Healthier Church**: Ronald W. Richardson

**Healing for Damaged Emotions**: David C. Cook

**Cultivating Wholeness**: Margaret Kornfeld