

The mission of Brandywine Valley Baptist Church is to introduce people to Jesus Christ and help them to follow Him. The church helps people to follow Him through public worship, Christian education classes, small groups, opportunities to serve, and opportunities for fellowship. Two words describe the nature of these five helps.

First, they are environments. Environments are settings that immerse people in Christian truth in such a way that they can focus on their relationship with Christ and with other believers. The Church, like Noah's ark, is a place of refuge from the unrelenting efforts of the world to remove God from human consideration. Building and sustaining these environments is the hard work the Pastoral Staff and their teams do.

However, these environments do you no good, if you don't take advantage of them. Public worship, Christian education classes, small groups, opportunities to serve, and opportunities for fellowship are five environments; they are also five disciplines. Taking advantage of what they offer requires discipline on your part. Being here is the hard work you do to benefit from those environments.

The Pastoral staff and its teams never stop trying to make these five environments better. We want to bless you with them. And I have seen enough good churches to tell you that what we have here is really good. If you take advantage every week of what we offer just on Sunday morning, you will be a better human being. If you add a small group to your weekly agenda and look for routine opportunities to serve and hang out with other believers, you won't be the same person a year from now.

That raises a question: What kind of person might you be a year from now? What is all the hard work for? It's important to answer that question, because a congregation and its pastors can easily settle into a routine and be really busy or just go through the motions and look really busy and never entertain the possibility that the congregation might be moving away from Christ, and never entertain the certainty that half the people in any congregation have no idea what following Jesus Christ is about. There's a wise Christian proverb: God has no grandchildren. Every congregation is one generation away from extinction. Do we care? I know we do care. So, what is all the hard work for?

### **What Is a Disciple?**

Jesus told us. He said, "**Make disciples of all nations.**" (Matthew 28:19) All the hard work in this church is for the purpose of making disciples. Non-religious circles still use the word **disciples** favorably but not often. Christians commonly use it, because Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts commonly use it. So, what they say should shape our understanding of what a disciple is. Four passages will do that for us.

First, let's look at Acts 6:7. **So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.** Now look at Acts 11:26, the last sentence in that verse: **The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.** **Disciples** was the commonly accepted name for those who believed in Jesus Christ. **Christians** was a later, unflattering synonym for **disciples**. The public today never calls believers disciples. It calls us Christians, and we call ourselves Christians, and that's okay. But among ourselves we are going to use the word **disciples**. It has an edge to it that the word *Christian* has lost. The next three New Testament references give it that edge.

Let's start with John 8:31: **To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."** A disciple of Jesus holds to the teaching of Jesus. That means we read the four Gospels to see what Jesus taught, and we

hold to His teaching by putting it into practice. Verse 32 attaches this magnificent promise to such obedience. **“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** Obedience to the teaching of Jesus is the path to liberty.

A second New Testament reference defines a disciple even more edgily. Matthew 16:24: **Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”** A disciple of Jesus makes sacrifices for the sake of Jesus, and some disciples make the ultimate sacrifice. If you wonder what kind of sacrifices you might have to make, you can find out by holding to the teaching of Jesus.

A third New Testament reference takes us back to John 15:8. Jesus said, **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”** A disciple of Jesus shows that He is a disciple of Jesus by what he does. Disciples of Jesus don’t just talk the talk, they walk the walk. People know. They see it.

A disciple of Jesus is someone who holds to the teaching of Jesus by putting it into practice. Putting it into practice will sooner or later cost us, but it will also show that we really are disciples of Jesus. Our hard work here has been misguided or has failed, if people are becoming that kind of disciple. We may have introduced people to Jesus Christ, but we have not helped them to follow Him.

### **Disciples at BVBC**

Now, let’s talk about disciples at BVBC. Let’s start with something formal. We have a church covenant. When people stand before the congregation to be voted into formal membership, we ask them four questions based on the covenant. They have seen these questions ahead of time, and they agree to affirm before God and this congregation what the covenant asks of them.

The first question goes like this: “With the help of Christ will you seek to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ?” Are we setting people up to be hypocrites by asking them to say “Yes” to that question? Not for a minute! People say, “Yes,” not because they claim to be fully devoted followers of Christ, but because they aspire to hold to the teaching of Jesus in a costly and public way. You can say, “Yes,” to that, whether you are a beginner or a seasoned disciple.

Remember: the Church is not for people who finally got good enough to get in; it is for people who finally realized they were bad enough to get in. We are all works in progress here, and we acknowledge that. So, we cut each other lots of slack and try to help each other. Maturing as a disciple of Jesus happens only in the company of like-minded people, who are at different stages of spiritual maturity and growing at different paces, but who have not stopped growing.

That’s enough for now about formal discipleship in this congregation. Let’s make it personal. Many of you here, many, (and thanks be to God!) know from long, firsthand experience of being devoted followers of our Lord. It is a beautiful thing to see Christ formed in you (Galatians 4:19). Watching your faith in Jesus work through love is one of the joys of pastoral ministry. God has granted us great solidarity in our labors together. That’s why I am confident that you will share my burden for this congregation. I’ll share it in a moment.

Many others of you have wakened to the possibilities of being disciples. Jesus said (John 10:10b), **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** You are

discovering that following Christ is not a straightjacket; it is a get out of jail free card. You are learning to pray, to discover the wisdom of scripture, to serve people in need, to get yourself out of bed on Sunday morning to give glory to God – you never thought you would voluntarily do any of that. And you have discovered that doing it is not a burden; it gives you joy. You may still feel at times the tug of life's worries, and the enticement of money, and the sheer lust for things, most of which you don't need; but like a surfer learning to get up on his board and stay up, you are learning to hold to the teachings of Jesus. It is exciting to watch.

And that brings me to my burden. We have 1200+ adults in this church, according to our database. Pastor Karl tells me we have about 200 adults in Sunday School. Where are the other 1000? We have about 400 BVBC adults in small groups. Where are the other 800? Hundreds of people come through our doors, sit in a worship service, go away and return intermittently. Are you feeling the burden and opportunity I am feeling? Jesus charged us to continue His mission in the world. What shall we do about the hundreds of casual observers who walk through our doors?

### **Caring**

First, we are going to continue doing everything we are presently doing. The five environments we talked about earlier are good and effective, but they are not enough for the future of BVBC. We need new ideas. I want to talk next Sunday about one idea that I think has real potential to make disciples among the hundreds of people who walk through our doors today and the thousands more to come in the next decade.

That's next Sunday. Today let me set the stage for our future. I need your imagination to help me here. Let's say you go to Super G or to Home Depot on a busy Saturday. You have a list of things to buy, and you might need help finding an item on your list. You pass dozens of people, and you might nod or smile but no conversation takes place, unless you can't find an employee, and so you ask another customer, a stranger, where something is located.

You talk to an employee at the deli counter or in the paint department. You talk about what you want to buy; you don't exchange names, and you don't ask about their kids. You might say, "How are you?" but you don't want any answer but "I'm fine. How are you?" You go to the checkout line, and the cashier greets you with some degree of courtesy and intelligibility by saying, "Did you find everything okay?" rings you up, says, "Sign here please, thank you, and have a good day," and you leave.

It's not a bad experience, but nobody expresses human feelings, and nobody knows your name. That's what it means to be impersonal, and our lives are full of it. Hunger for the personal inspired a hit pop song from the 1980's sitcom *Cheers*? It said (<http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Cheers-lyrics-TV-Theme-Songs/A361DCBA65733B03482572A4000B46E3>):

Making your way in the world today  
Takes everything you've got.  
Taking a break from all your worries  
Sure would help a lot.  
Wouldn't you like to get away?  
Sometimes you want to go  
Where everybody knows your name,  
And they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see,  
Our troubles are all the same.  
You wanna be where everybody knows your name.  
You wanna go where people know,  
People are all the same,  
You wanna go where everybody knows your name.

Jesus said, **“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** (John 13:35) There’s a lot I don’t know about love, but I’m pretty sure it means to learn your name and to let you know we’re always glad to see you. So, when you walked in here this morning, did people let you know they were glad you came? If not, don’t go away. Accept my apology on behalf of many of us who know better and want to do better. And if you knew us better, you’d find out pretty fast that we have the same troubles are your do.

Has Christ been so formed in us that the thought of Him and the thought of worshiping Him here together Sunday by Sunday with fellow believers in a changing and uncertain world overrides our own troubles and creates enough space in our souls to say hello to someone we don’t know and make that person feel at home?

I can talk until I am blue in the face about making disciples and the Great Commission, but until we care about the people, who walk through our front door to the 9:45 service and walk out again and come intermittently, all my talk is just religious claptrap. Am I the only one here in anguish about that?

### **Take Away**

So, I’d like to propose a step we can take to make this church feel less institutional and more relational. Would you find and introduce yourself to someone you don’t know each Sunday between now and January 1, 2016? Never ask people if they are new here. Just say, “I’m sorry. I don’t know you. My name is Bo. What’s your name?”

At the very least ask people how they is doing and if you can help them find their way around. Maybe you invite people to sit with you in worship, to go downstairs to Java for coffee and pastries and discover where they work and their family; invite them to go to a class or small group with you. Those are simple, powerful steps to make people feel like we are glad they came.