

WHY WE NEED MENTORS

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When I was a kid our family moved, on average, about every 2 ½ years until I was almost in high school. Part of that package was the angst-filled effort to make friends in new places at frequent intervals – not easy when you are wired shy and have a goofy accent from the last place you lived. The advice my mom always gave on that first day of school was advice I think most mothers give at some point: *Go out and find people you want to become like, and be friends with them.* It's pretty solid wisdom. It is also the foundation for mentorship – forming intentional relationships with people (or a person) who embody characteristics that we want to grow in ourselves.

Although Scripture is filled with examples of mentorship/discipleship, the most notable may be Paul's relationship with Timothy. II Timothy, in particular, is the last letter Paul wrote, and in this letter Paul is guiding Timothy in his role as a pastor in Ephesus. Paul writes from a prison cell in Rome, likely within weeks of his own death. The wisdom of this letter is tailored to Timothy's difficult assignment in Ephesus, and takes into account the specific challenges Timothy is facing. Paul could have been writing a memoir, collecting his best teachings – he had some time on his hands. But what he chose to write was a simple letter of encouragement and guidance to his young protégé Timothy.

In Titus, chapter 2, we are given the counsel that older women are to not only be good examples to younger women, but to *actively* disciple them.

Mentorship is to be purposeful on both sides of the equation – mature believers seeking those to mentor, and younger, less “seasoned” believers seeking the wisdom of a mentor.

As one who is on the pastoral staff at SBCC, and as one who is growing increasingly “seasoned,” I hope you'll indulge me a few observations:

1. *Some of the most significant spiritual growth at SBCC takes place in homes and coffee shops around Santa Barbara in the middle of the week.* Intentional, personal discipleship – whether one-on-one, or in small groups—is a huge component to spiritual growth, a great encouragement towards living into our spiritual gifts, and can sometimes provide a valuable challenge, admonishment or warning. All of it serves to grow us.
2. *The culture of mentorship seems to be waning.* As the culture around us changes, so the church changes. Some things are fine to let go; some things are worth fighting for. We now live in an age of information at our fingertips. Sometimes that information (and how easily it can be accessed) can supplant actual people. On-line banking replaces contact with the tellers; Wikipedia replaces asking the librarian (sometimes); Google has become a verb we exercise every day in lieu of asking another person a question, etc. You get the idea. The subtle shift is slow, but it is a gradual turning from *relationship*. Instead of seeking out those who are older, more mature and wise, we have the “immediacy” of turning instead to the

quick and efficient answers. For younger believers, it is much easier to seek the “pooled wisdom” of peers, or that of technology.

3. *Older Christians, we are not off the hook.* At the risk of offending, I have to say that it is sometimes disappointing to me to see so many wise and gifted Christians among us who have never sought out a younger believer to encourage. And yet, this is our responsibility and our privilege as followers of Jesus! I have often asked various people in our body if they would be willing to mentor another believer. The number one answer I get is, *I just don't think I'm qualified.* While I understand where this is coming from, I also think it is a misunderstanding of the gospel of Jesus. There is nothing we can do to “qualify” ourselves for anything. Jesus paid it for us; he gave us responsibilities to encourage one another and to build up his church. This is our qualification. If we truly believe that the good news of Jesus -- His death and resurrection for sinners-- is the world's only hope, then the passing on of that message should be our life's work. As Josh Harris says, “. . .if we can teach, train, and disciple men and women to trust in, love, and proclaim the message of Christ and him crucified, then we've accomplished something worthwhile.”

The best mentors I have had in my life were the ones who *knew* they weren't qualified, and that is precisely why they felt such freedom pointing to the sufficiency –not of themselves—but of Christ.

4. *Mentoring is about connecting the spiritual to the practical.* This may be one of the main reasons why we need mentors more than ever in the church. The nuclear family of the “Ozzie and Harriet” days has all but vanished – not quite gone, but definitely not the norm. The everyday things that some of our older generations learned from parents, relatives and family friends are increasingly learned elsewhere. Sexuality, singleness, dating, marriage, juggling career and family, navigating losses in life, financial decisions – these are all practical realities that need Christ at the center. The safety of healthy mentoring relationships can sometimes be both rudder and compass.

If we agree that mentorship is indeed something worth fighting for in church life, where do we begin?

- Be intentional right where you are. Are you in a homegroup or other small group? Start praying about mentoring connections God might have for you there. The place where your relationships most naturally overlap is the best place to start thinking about a mentoring relationship. Simply showing up to a group isn't mentorship – in either direction. Mentorship involves the risk of asking (either to give or receive mentoring) and committed investment.
- Keep realistic expectations: Mentors, you supply encouragement and significance in the life of your “mentee” only to the extent that you point them to Christ. Mentees, no one person will ever give you all that you want. In fact, they will likely disappoint you. The point is to grow deeper in your relationship with Christ, and to keep your eyes fixed on that.

- Pay it forward: A “culture” of mentorship is one where we are mentored and then, in turn, mentor another. We should all be striving to mature in Christ so that we can encourage other believers.

One of my earlier mentors was my high school Young Life area director. He was charismatic, zany, crazy, and he exuded love for the Lord. He walked a hard road as a leader, and remained steadfast through some losses in his personal life. He had many young eyes watching. I recently saw him at a Young Life banquet, now much older and using a cane. As I saw him across the room, it occurred to me that I had never told him how much his leadership and love for God had influenced my life. After several decades, I knelt down next to his chair and told him. I was so thankful for the opportunity. The sweetness of that exchange may or may not be experienced in our mentoring/discipling relationships. Perhaps heaven will be full of scenes such as that. I don't know. What I do know is that Jesus didn't tell us to make converts; he told us to make *disciples*. I am so grateful for the mentors in my life, and also acutely thankful for what I have learned about the heart of God as I bring my own flawed self alongside those younger in the faith. Let's press on to be people who are intentional about our own growth in Christ, and just as intentional about passing that along to others.