

Dear friends of Vital Signs Ministries,

June 2025



A couple of weeks ago I preached the funeral sermon for a friend whose life, like mine, had been profoundly shaped back in the early 70s by the Christian Brotherhood, a unique evangelism and discipleship ministry Which flourished here in Omaha in the days of the Jesus Revolution. Thinking about those influences recalled an article I wrote for Vital Signs Blog back in 2016. And after re-reading it this morning, I decided the

ever-relevant applications it presents would make an interesting and stimulating LifeSharer letter. I hope you'll agree. And so, after a few edits, I print below the article I initially titled

“Reflections on Radical Discipleship.”

Yes, I continue to hope that the days of spiritual “great awakenings” are not all behind us. We are, after all, promised the mercies of God to be new (and available) every morning. Revolutionary change can yet occur in individual lives and even in culture, if we simply unplug ourselves from the world and connect our minds instead to the glorious Creator God Who gave His Son for our salvation. So, please come with me for a look at 5 themes marking the radical discipleship of the early years of the Christian Brotherhood.



1) A dramatic change of identity. The converts to Christianity in those heady days of the Jesus Revolution wholeheartedly embraced the chance to be forgiven, to be *made*



completely different from what they had been, and to *live completely different* from the culture in which they had previously walked. Nowadays, I'm afraid, too many Christians boast in being just like everybody else. They downplay, even mock, the idea of a radical lifestyle change. In fashion, in entertainment choices, in accepting the aggressive liberalism of the government schools, in chasing the constant lure of advertisers, in language and demeanor, young people in the church tend to copy their non-Christian peers. But the young people involved with the Christian Brotherhood were delighted to be different. We willingly accepted the responsibilities

of living counter-culture lifestyles because, after all, we knew all too well that the world had nothing to offer us. We'd been there and done that. We therefore jumped at the chance to exchange darkness for light, lies for truth, slavery for freedom.

We stopped boozing and doing drugs. We ended our promiscuity and criminal behavior. We moved away from bad influences. We stopped watching TV, not because it was necessarily evil, but simply because we now had a host of other things to do...things that were interesting and active, things that were pure and beneficial. I believe we need a new sense today of how peculiar (the Bible's word) a people we are; how *set apart* and *set against* the cosmos we are; how revolutionary should be our outlook on God, life, truth, the future, and the world around us.

2) A solid theological foundation. The Christian Brotherhood gave us a strong, unshakeable theological foundation. This was somewhat unique among other Jesus People ministries as we featured Bible classes taught by skilled and experienced Bible scholars, including instructors at Grace Bible Institute who came into the inner city to deliver expositional, exegetical Bible classes to us several nights a week.

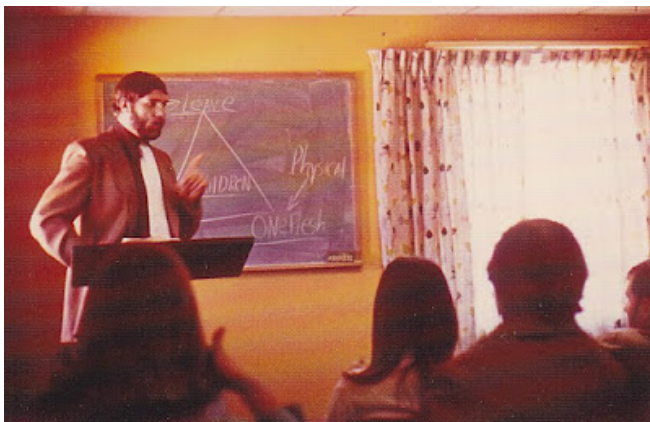
And we couldn't get enough of it! We not only listened intently, we filled our spiral notebooks with the information we gleaned. And it wasn't easy stuff either. No cream-puff Christianity here. Indeed, we learned later that the Grace instructors were giving us the very lectures they gave in their upper-level theology courses at the college. But, unlike many of the Grace students, we new converts would eagerly listen, carefully study our notes, and then compare them with what we were learning in our personal Bible study. We would also discuss them in depth with one another. We knew we had an awful lot to learn...and a lot to unlearn too. Yes, we sometimes fell back into patterns from our past and so our sanctification required us to regularly repent and even make restitution when possible. But God's grace kept moving us forward and we took our duties as disciples very seriously.

Do you see much of that in today's churches? Young people so eager to learn that they forsake entertainment and sports and social media in order to attend hard-edged Bible studies? Young people crowding into the front rows at church (as the Brotherhood kids did when we went together to hear Darrell Scott at Pleasantview Berean Church), kids holding well-marked Bibles along with pens and notebooks to learn still more? Young people who added to lectures and sermons their own studies in apologetics, church history, evangelism, and comparative religion? Young people being stretched intellectually, held accountable for their beliefs and lifestyles, and challenged to learn to pray and serve and be ever conformed to the image of Christ?

Or do you see instead our church youth of today isolated in their own age groups, being coddled and pampered, given heavy doses of comfort and fun, protected from sacrifice and hard

work, promised popularity and prosperity? Such a state is a far cry from the discipleship required of young Christians throughout history. And it's a far cry too from the discipleship undergone by most young believers in Third World churches today. Isn't it time the Western Church embrace again the biblical ideals of radical discipleship? For our sake as well as God's?

3) Godly fellowship. The discipleship process at the Christian Brotherhood was very strong on fellowship. But our fellowship was not about fun and games, even though there was often a fun element to it. Rather, it concentrated on our common participation in the new adventure we were enjoying in the Lord. Bible study. Giving witness



to the gospel in the parks and on front porches.

Praying. Commiserating with one another over past hurts and failures while taking bold actions to change. Talking about what we were reading. Involvement in various ministries. Worshipping together with guitars and choruses and old hymns.

We quickly realized we needed regular stimulation to love and good deeds, the spur to keep learning and maturing. We also knew we needed an accountability factor to help protect us from the easily-besetting sins of our past. And, as a bonus, this kind of intimate, energizing fellowship taught us what our spiritual gifts were and how to best use them in ministry.

4) Practice in Christian service. As was the case with the apostles who walked with Jesus in the 1st Century, the new converts at the Christian Brotherhood learned from precept, from example, and from direct participation. We were young (most of us) and very inexperienced, yet we welcomed the activity the Lord brought our way in evangelism, prayer, counseling, physical labor, developing study habits, getting involved in church, repairing the damage we had caused in our families. The writer of Hebrews describes mature believers as "those who by practice have had their senses trained to discern good and evil." We also were being trained as we *practiced* our faith in the real world. Oh, yes; there was a lot of uncertain and amateurish action on our part and plenty of learning through our failures. But learn we did.



5) Reading and reflecting. There's one more item that was crucial to my early discipleship, one so influential that it deserves special note. And that is that the Christian Brotherhood "baptized" me into books! I had been an avid reader in my youth and, even in my otherwise wasted years of high school, I found pleasure and value in literature. But in my sad spiral downward after high school, I had stopped reading altogether. And even when I was converted to Christianity in the early spring of 1970, I was rather slow to get serious about books. That all changed dramatically when I hitchhiked into the strange town of Omaha in the summer of 1970. For within 24 hours of hitting town, I was living at the Christian Brotherhood and directed to start reading Harry Ironside's commentary on *The Book of Acts*. That was followed by a dozen more Ironside commentaries and then books by C.S. Lewis, Dwight Pentecost, Howard Hendricks, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and Anthony Hoekma. I also began to buy my own Bible study books: concordances, commentaries, a Greek/English interlinear New Testament, the 5-volume ISBE, and more. And towards the end of my time at the Brotherhood, I discovered Francis Schaeffer and others that were part of L'Abri. Those books opened up an adventurous new chapter in my learning...and my life.

Those books provided a strong foundation for me, one that only grew stronger in the decades since. Good books have enriched my relationships. They have given me great personal pleasure. They have been a key defense against the moral pollution and intellectual debilitation brought on by watching too much television and modern film. And, again, that all started at the Christian Brotherhood where I was blessed beyond measure to receive a radical discipleship.

A healthy Christianity that yields peace, happiness, and confidence? A holy lifestyle that lights up the darkness instead of being compromised and covered up by the surrounding cosmos? I'm convinced that these things begin with a regimen of radical discipleship highlighted by the five themes I've described: 1) A dramatic change of identity. 2) A solid theological foundation. 3) Godly fellowship. 4) Practice in Christian service. 5) Reading and reflecting. If the Church has any hope of reclaiming its power to influence the world, it must bring these things back into play for our congregations. And especially for our youth. We must pray to that end. But, in addition to our fervent intercession, you and I must act in whatever ways we can to advocate, model, and encourage radical discipleship in the cause of Christ.

And that was "Reflections on Radical Discipleship." Please note also that I use the word *radical* in its original meaning; that is, the Latin word used of roots -- things that are fundamental and/or essential. And, of course, the fundamental and essential duties of a Christian's life must include a reverence for and a passionate defense of the sanctity of human life...which connects nowadays to Claire's and my involvement with Vital Signs Ministries. Thank you for helping us pursue those noble duties.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Denny", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.