



DNA
of a
CHRIST
FOLLOWER

The 8 Essential Traits

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Section I: The Personal Challenge

Chapter 1: Introduction

A body on the ground. Flashing lights. Yellow police tape securing the area. A detective wearing latex gloves shining a flashlight, looking closely at the scene. A pause, a hair carefully lifted from the victim's clothing and placed in a bag. It is not the victim's color. Lab work later identifies some key markers in the hair. These markers match a suspect who is eventually convicted of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt.

If you watch any television whatsoever, you have seen many variations of the above scenario. And while it doesn't work quite so quickly and easily in real life as in the crime dramas, DNA analysis has made a huge difference in police work over the last few decades—not to mention medical and anthropological studies.

DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid—the building block of the chromosomes, the genetic code of all organisms (except some viruses), the matter that is responsible for the transmission of hereditary characteristics from parents to children. A piece of your hair, a flake of your skin, your blood, even your saliva can be identified as yours by the presence of your unique DNA fingerprint. DNA matches are useful in identifying criminals, victims of crime, and the propensity for some diseases. Increasingly, DNA technology is being used for medical research and the development of new treatments. In short, DNA is a physical marker, a genetic snapshot of a person or organism.

Is there a similar marker, a nonphysical DNA that demonstrates someone's spiritual make-up?

Several years ago I had the privilege of spending a week at Kananaskis Lodge in the Rocky Mountain foothills near Calgary, Alberta. I was there for a week of training with Sonlife Ministries.

One of my instructors for the week pointed out that if people in our churches come to three hours of church activity per week, we have only the equivalent of six 24-hour days per year to build into their lives. Due to this limited window, we need to be realistic about what we can do in that amount of time. We also need to be focused and deliberate about exactly what we are trying to accomplish. He said, in essence, "You are supposed to be a disciple, and you are called to make disciples. But have you defined what a disciple is? Have you articulated the non-negotiable qualities that you must build into people's lives for them to be successful followers of Jesus Christ?" Those were disturbing questions. Actually, it was my inner *answers* that were even more disturbing: "No" and "No." His next question bothered me even more: "Are you structuring your teaching, your leading, your church life in such a way as to develop those qualities?"

Those questions began to dominate my mind. I was in my tenth year of pastoring and had tasted at least a small measure of success in ministry. I was becoming entrenched in a way of leading and developing a church, which, while it brought people to faith in Christ and caused some growth, was neither as effective nor as efficient as I felt it could be. It wasn't clear in either my

own mind or the minds of those I was leading exactly what it was we were trying to accomplish in people's lives once they identified with Jesus. As a result, my efforts and the ministries of the church lacked focus. There was no mechanism to say "We should do this" or "We shouldn't do that" and no meaningful way to measure outcomes.

And so I was introduced to what my instructor referred to as the DDP—Description of a Discipled Person. BUT, in a stroke of educational genius (or downright nastiness—I waver in my opinion) neither the instructor nor the accompanying Sonlife material gave us such a description. Instead, we were challenged to define, on our own, eight or fewer qualities that were the non-negotiable characteristics of a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ—qualities, which if someone possessed them, would make that person an unmistakable, rock solid disciple of Jesus Christ.

The week continued with more thought-provoking teaching. But I was nagged by the idea that I was called to do something and was in fact attempting to do something—make disciples—without ever having clearly defined the target. And I had been doing so for ten years! At the same time, I knew there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of pastors functioning just as I was, not to mention the millions of Christians who, like me, were unclear on what it meant to be a disciple. I felt like rewinding time and starting pastoral ministry, and a large portion of my Christian life, all over again.

That week began what has been one of the most profitable exercises I have ever done as a Christian leader, and as a follower of Jesus. While it's easy to come up with a list of several dozen qualities a disciple is supposed to have, trying to boil such a list down to eight or fewer is quite painful and difficult, as our instructor predicted.

Why eight or fewer? Why not just make a list of whatever comes up and go with that number? Realistically, eight is probably even too many. Few people have the capacity to focus on more than two or three objectives at once. Phone numbers have seven digits, in addition to the area code, for a reason. I've found that a limit of eight allows most if not all of the possible qualities to be condensed and combined in a logical way, while still giving a number that is not completely overwhelming.

My response to the challenge began with a reading of the New Testament, making a list of every possible character quality I could find. Some were stated outright in the verses, some were implied. I ended up with about 25 typed pages, two columns each, nearly two thousand individual entries. Many qualities were repeated in the list, but there were still dozens of possibilities. I then began to boil them down. I asked for input from other people. I read descriptions of Christ Followers that I came across. In time, I managed to condense my list to eight. I have taught through these traits in several churches and have become increasingly convinced both of the need to articulate such a list, and that the ones I have settled on are indeed some essential character qualities of a Christ Follower. I believe that if a people possess and are growing in these characteristics, they will be identifiable as biblical followers of Jesus Christ.

Once when I was planning a series of services around these topics, someone made the comment that it was kind of like the DNA of a Christ Follower, the unique identifiable features of a disciple of Jesus Christ. And so my original "DDP" became the DNA of a Christ Follower.

If you consider yourself a Christ Follower—and forgive me if this comes across as overly dramatic—this idea of identifying some essential accompanying character traits could revolutionize the way you approach your Christian life. You see, too often we get caught up in what a Christian is supposed to do and forget that it's about the heart, about character. What we **do** flows from who and what we **are**.

The character qualities described in this book explain who we are, or at least who we are called to be—the genetic markers that will identify us as passionate followers of Jesus Christ. Some of the traits are obvious; they may have already come to your mind. But others are a bit more surprising, and might not be on the list most of us would generate apart from a survey of scripture. The development of these qualities will make you into “a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2.3), a person who is both salty salt and unhidden light (Matthew 5), someone who “bears much fruit” (John 15) and who will “be confident and unashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2.28). Since we reproduce what we are, these traits will ensure that we are disciples who make disciples, not merely cultural Christians who focus on getting people to pray a prayer and then allow them to carry on unchanged, impotent to challenge and transform our culture, participating in the coming of the Kingdom.

If you are in “spiritual exploration mode”, still trying to figure out if Jesus Christ is who he said he was— “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14.6) —this study may be helpful for you as well. As you read, you will grow in your understanding of what the Bible says a Christ Follower is, versus the many caricatures you see in the media and sometimes, unfortunately, in the church. I hope this will help you better understand what it is that God will do in you if you respond to His call to receive forgiveness through Jesus.

It is important to state early on that what is primarily being described in these pages is not the way of salvation, the way to connect with your Creator, though this will be discussed briefly. The Bible teaches that we come to God through Jesus Christ, by repentance and faith, both of which are gifts from God.

“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 20.21)

Repentance is a mental, emotional, spiritual, moral, total-person U-turn, a change of heart and mind leading to a change of action. It is turning from our way of doing life to God's plan for doing life. It is a turn from our self-sufficiency to a life of dependence on God, a turn from disconnectedness with our Creator to the connectedness and relationship with him for which we were created.

Faith is not merely a belief that Jesus existed or that he lived and died and rose. When people are told, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16.31) it is a call to accept that he died in their place. As it says in 1 Peter, “He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” (1 Peter 2.24) The way of salvation, the way to connect with God, is to repent and believe. The character qualities defined and expounded upon in this book are the results of that repentance and faith, a thorough

expression of the kind of life God both calls us to and creates in us through Jesus.

One obvious question about this book's approach is, "Why not simply use some of the biblical lists like the Fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5), the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) or some of the other character lists in the New Testament letters?" My answer is that none of those lists were intended to be a comprehensive synthesis of all possible character qualities, though undoubtedly if we lived out either of those lists we would be doing well. This compilation is, in essence, a theme study including all of those lists and going beyond them to identify and isolate qualities that are mentioned or implied throughout the New Testament. Another fair question is, "Why not include the Old Testament?" In fact, while the OT wasn't included in the making of the original list, apart from the ever-present "faith and obedience" we see in most major Old Testament characters, it is very much included in rounding out and explaining the character qualities that were discovered.

On the character level, the ultimate goal of the Christian life is to become like Jesus. In a word, the target is Christlikeness. The role of church leadership is to facilitate the accomplishment of this goal: "...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4.12-13)

The traits highlighted should be recognized as character traits of Jesus himself. So, properly understood, the DNA of a Christ Follower is the DNA of Jesus himself, planted in us through the new birth, increasingly being revealed as we move toward maturity.

Once a person repents of their sins and places their faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and salvation, they begin the journey towards becoming like Jesus. What will that look like? What character qualities should be nurtured and developed? What does it actually mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ? This book is my current answer to those questions. I have written it to challenge pastors and Christian leaders involved in discipleship to clarify what exactly it is they are trying, with the Spirit's help, to achieve in people's lives. I have also written for the many individuals who use such books for personal devotions and small group fodder. Indeed it has been forged in and for the practical world of local church ministry because that is the context in which disciples are made.

In the end, your list might look different than mine, but I suspect you will see this as a fairly comprehensive description of a Christ Follower. I hope it will help you, as it has helped me, to shape any ministry you are involved with into a disciple-making effort and, more importantly, to be shaped into a passionate pursuer of Jesus.