

The Way of Discipleship

How Northland approaches rules, regulations, and student governance to create authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

Within the Great Commission itself, Christ commands us to “go therefore and make disciples.” But how? Since Great Commission living is what Northland International University prepares students for, making disciples who can, in turn, go out and make more disciples is central to everything we do. Over the past fifty years, Northland has prayerfully and purposefully developed a biblical approach to discipleship. We call it “The Way of Discipleship.”

In loving obedience to our Savior, our aim has always been God’s glory. Because of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ, we have focused our energies on fulfilling the Great Commission, using the two Great Commandments—love God, love others—as our primary motivation. From this foundation, we have seen discipleship come to life in the lives of our students—not just while they are students, but throughout their lives as they have gone out into the world to serve Him.

Christ calls His disciples to follow Him. So, as our central model of discipleship, we must look to Christ’s methods and pattern ours after His. The world is in desperate need for more “Christ followers” today. At Northland, we have grown increasingly burdened about the lack of authentic Christlikeness in Christianity. Even though our culture has been quick to label something as “Christian,” true Christlikeness is becoming increasingly rare.

First of all, Christ’s standards for living are much higher than most are willing to admit. Christ told us in the Sermon on the Mount to “be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” Sadly, there are many today who are lowering their standards for discipleship for fear of becoming culturally irrelevant. Yet, that same fear can also work in the opposite direction. It can divert focus away from Christ’s model of

discipleship when believers are tempted to concoct human-made systems of control to protect themselves from a toxic culture, thinking they will be able to achieve an acceptable level of perfection by human means. It’s a quite natural response. But even so,

Since its inception in 1961, Northland has been known for “heart” and its philosophy of immersive, life-touching-life discipleship. Now, Northland rearticulates its way of discipleship that “raises the bar” for creating transformed lives for the glory of God. It’s due to a more intensive and intentional focus on the way Christ disciplined his followers in the Bible.

believers can unwittingly lose sight of their original intent of developing authentic Christlikeness and find themselves developing something thought to be authentic, but instead it turns out to be a thing just as unsettling.

At Northland, we see Christ’s command as demanding an intensification of our commitment to being His disciples, but that requires a clarification of what being a disciple of Christ truly means. As a tool to remain motivated and true to this commitment, we are calling it . . .

Raising the Bar

Jesus, at just the right times during His public ministry, showed His followers how He raised the bar. In the Sermon on the Mount, He gave us a clear example when He said, “you have heard that it was said of those of old, ‘You shall not murder’ . . . but I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother . . .” Jesus spoke of adultery and lust, even divorce and oaths, in similar fashion. Raising the bar

was a unique characteristic to Christ’s teachings. Not only did Christ elevate teachings, he deepened them, too. He turned morality from a mere external act into an internal motivation. Jesus became mostly concerned with what was happening within the heart. He saw how prescriptive, external conformity among the Pharisees, no matter how rigorously applied, was not producing the needed internal transformation vital to true followers of Christ. So, what did Jesus do? He raised the bar, and that’s exactly what we need to do also.

Elevate the Great Commandments:Northland’s “Two Imperatives”

When asked what was most important, Christ responded clearly and unflinchingly: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these

Raising the Bar From	Raising the Bar To
The Law	The Life in Christ
Precepts & Traditions	Biblical Authority
Works	Faith
Doing	Believing
Pride	Humility
Insecurity	Security
Fear	Love
Control	Coaching
Rules	Tools
Outside-In	Inside-Out
Conformity	Transformation
Performance	Spirit-Filled Living
Hypocrisy	Authenticity

two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37–40 ESV) After belief, these two commandments serve as the primary guidelines for principled living for the believer. In Galatians, Paul tells us plainly that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Why? Christ makes love that important . . . and not just important but all-encompassing, too. No other command Christ gives us falls outside of or conflicts with these two great commandments.

At Northland, that’s why we make the Great Commandments the basis of all we do in discipleship. We call them our “two imperatives.” As Christ makes them that important, in humble obedience we are making them that important as well. As policy and without exception, everything we teach to or demand of our students at Northland must now emanate from these two commands: love God, love others.

Discipling the heart is so much more demanding than disciplining actions. A rule book chock full of hundreds of prescriptive restrictions and patterns of conformity doesn’t get to an effective discipling of the heart very often. We can achieve outward conformity while never achieving inward transformation. Conversely, it’s even possible to do many good and wonderful things and still miss the mark. If good deeds are not done in love, they are worthless. Chapter 13 of First Corinthians warns us of this.

That’s why Northland stresses life-touching-life discipleship as key to the means of our discipling our students. Yes, it requires more investment of time and of the heart, but it yields the results Christ asks of us. Plus, it

gives our students an effective pattern of discipleship they can take with them the rest of their lives. The key to this inward heart discipleship is the primacy of our two imperatives: love God, love others.

Clarify Expectations

But these two imperatives come with expectations. Christ’s instructions to His followers did not end with the establishment of the Great Commandments. He showed how those two commands will look in real life. In

similar fashion, at Northland we have expectations of our students. And just as Christ worked hard to internalize what matters most into the hearts of His followers, that’s where Northland’s emphasis is as well.

By design, each expectation Northland establishes must be biblically based and clearly articulated as to their purpose and role in creating Christlikeness among our students, or they must be clearly articulated as merely practical in nature. There is a natural tendency for expectations that have been established for practical reasons to become, over time, elevated to the level of importance with biblical commands. Even though it usually happens with the best of intentions, this is an

extreme danger that does more to destroy the long-term discipleship development of a student than one can imagine. We see in the Bible how it caused the Pharisees to get offtrack, and the Pharisees are not alone in being vulnerable to this danger.

Northland International University is a Bible college. That’s why Northland is not willing to label any expectation as biblical that cannot be properly exegeted from Scripture.

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We are not willing to allow any human traditions, no matter how reasonably inferred they may seem, to get entangled with and confused as being on par with the authority of Scripture either. We are concerned about this because we are focused on the long-term spiritual health of every Northland student. We want their faith to be strong and vibrant, and for that to occur, their faith must be fed purely from a Word-filled, Spirit-filled life. For Northland, the truths stated expressly in the Bible are our authority, and we hold to these truths without apology.

Engage in Discipleship

As mentioned before, life-touching-life discipleship is Northland’s “Way of Discipleship.” It is a model that is patterned after Jesus’ own approach to discipling His followers. It’s the model expressly taught by Christ in Matthew 18 and reemphasized in Galatians 6:1. Northland’s “Way of Discipleship” begins with training, from training to clarified expectations, from expectations to directed responsibility, and from responsibility to personal accountability. At Northland, we intentionally nurture a campus experience that creates for our students opportunities to get directly involved in each other’s lives, spurring each other on to good works and restoring each other biblically when entangled with sin. It radiates from the inside-out—from the heart to the exterior life. Therefore, we cannot rely on an artificial system that’s built simply on the accounting of “external wrongs” to discern the level of spiritual vitality. We have seen how easily these systems can be gamed and never get to the business of discipling the heart.

Because of this, we ask our faculty, staff, administration, and student body to covenant together in immersive, life-touching-life discipleship. We intentionally get involved in the lives of our students so that real, Christ-modeled discipleship can occur. We humbly pray with full reliance on the Holy Spirit to accomplish the transformative work of Christlikeness within the heart of each and

every student. And from this work, we pray that our students will become true followers of Christ who will deny themselves, take up their crosses, go to the far reaches of this world, and make disciples of others also.

The world needs more disciple-makers. Please pray with us that Northland International University will remain faithful and true to Christ’s teachings on discipleship. Pray also that more committed young people will come to Northland to be prepared as servant-leaders for Great Commission living.

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*Preparing the next generation of servant-leaders
for Great Commission living.*

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