



# Disciple

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How to Create a  
Community that Develops  
Passionate and Healthy  
Followers of Jesus

**Chuck Lawless**  
THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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*A Tyndale nonfiction imprint*

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-6464-4

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Pam,  
my partner in all I do  
and  
to all the men  
who have invested in me  
over the years*



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# Introduction

I WANT TO start by asking you three questions.

First, how would you rate your church in the areas of worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, prayer, and ministry? Which area would you rate the highest? The lowest?

Next, which of these areas in your church (if any) would you consider healthy? Unhealthy?

Finally, which area do you think most churches have consistently ranked the lowest for the twenty-plus years I've been doing this type of survey?

I have consulted with churches for almost three decades. For most of that time, I've used a 160-question Church Health Survey (now the Know Your Church Report) to learn a church's perception of its own health in the same six areas mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> We have used the survey with churches of all sizes, in several denominations, all around the country. Almost without exception, churches have reported that they are weakest in the areas of evangelism and discipleship. I cannot remember the last church I surveyed where that was not the case.

Those findings probably shouldn't be surprising. Depending on the study, anywhere from 65 percent to 85 percent of Protestant churches in the United States have plateaued or are declining.<sup>2</sup>

They are not reaching nonbelievers, nor are they discipling believers. A joint 2015 discipleship study by the Barna Group and The Navigators confirmed these concerns.<sup>3</sup> And I suspect these issues have not improved much since that study:

- ⦿ Church leaders admit that churches are not discipling new and young leaders very well.
- ⦿ Participation in discipleship activities such as Sunday school, spiritual mentoring, or group Bible studies tends to be weak.
- ⦿ Church leaders say that busyness and a lack of commitment to discipleship are the two biggest barriers to developing strong discipleship strategies.
- ⦿ Programmatic approaches to discipleship have not been effective.
- ⦿ A lack of equipped leaders willing to disciple others is a significant issue.
- ⦿ Overall, a lack of priority for discipleship at the individual and corporate levels has led to general apathy about spiritual growth.
- ⦿ Most churches have no means to evaluate whether their members are growing spiritually.

Clearly, we have not produced communities of passionate followers of Jesus. And we have a long way to go if we want to grow disciplemaking churches. At best, our discipleship efforts have been superficial.<sup>4</sup> As I've surveyed churches, I've discovered at least six reasons that churches don't disciple well. Do any of them describe your church?

1. **Many church leaders—pastors included—have never been disciplined.** That was true of me when I started pastoring more than forty years ago. You're not alone if that's your story too. If we knew the truth, I suspect the number of pastors who have not been intentionally disciplined would be surprisingly high.
2. **In many cases, church leaders find more reward in reporting new believers.** Some denominations, for example, ask for reports about new converts. Some give recognition to congregations that apparently evangelize well. Sometimes we pastors like to talk about our church's good evangelistic numbers. What we seldom report, though, is the number of believers intentionally being disciplined in our congregations. The number is often low, and the incentive for strategically reviewing this number is equally low.
3. **Discipleship is tough, tiring, messy work.** To disciple well means you have to walk with people in their everyday faith. You must be willing to encourage and lead through defeats and victories. You must be patient but persistent. Sometimes it's just easier not to do it.
4. **We've reduced discipleship to a series of courses.** Discipleship is life-on-life guidance; it's not simply completing a number of courses (and sometimes earning some kind of certificate). As an educator, I'm not opposed to curriculum as part of discipleship. But courses alone are not enough to produce devoted disciples of Jesus.
5. **We leave little room for struggle and growth in new believers.** Instead, we expect them to just "get it" and grow in Christlikeness almost immediately. When they

don't grow quickly enough, too often we judge them before we help them. We might grant grace to new believers on the mission field who struggle with leaving behind their non-Christian worldview and habits, but we offer little grace to our new-believer neighbors who face the same struggles.

6. **We don't always teach the high demands of the gospel.** When we fail to talk about things like Jesus' requirement that we deny ourselves and take up our cross (Luke 9:23), we teach a watered-down gospel. Consequently, people don't see the need for someone to walk with them in true discipleship.<sup>5</sup>

What I didn't include in this list is the problem underlying most of these issues: Many churches simply haven't given much intentional thought to discipling. They may have tried some programs, but any success was short-lived. Church leaders may have read books on the topic, but reading a book is quite different from implementing a strategy. They may have had conversations with other leaders about becoming a discipling church, but the initiative ended with the conversations.

On the other hand, leaders of strong discipleship ministries (called *discipleship exemplars* in the Barna/Navigator study) said two factors contribute the most to strong discipleship ministries: (1) support from senior leadership, and (2) a clear plan for developing disciples. My own research has shown that when leaders do not publicly prioritize discipleship, their churches won't either. They may talk the talk, but anything less than obvious support from leadership will hinder a church's discipleship strategy.

Discipleship exemplars in the Barna/Navigator study also

pointed to the significance of a clearly articulated strategy, though church leaders still recognized a need for much improvement in this area. Strong discipleship ministries know what their purpose is, understand where they want the ministry to go, and have a clear plan to get there. But it's not easy to find a church that has developed and implemented a clear pathway for believers to grow to be more and more like Christ. Few churches have mapped out an intentional path to maturity.

It's not that churches do *nothing*. They plan, but they don't always strategize.

Christian growth is often equated with "church activity," and there's usually a lot of activity going on. The problem is that busy church members remain undisciplined members because the church has no cohesive plan of spiritual formation. They are "doing stuff," but without the intentionality necessary for discipleship.

I liken the situation to puzzle pieces lying on the floor when no one knows what the puzzle is supposed to look like.<sup>6</sup> All the pieces may be there, but they won't be properly connected until someone can provide a picture of the completed puzzle. Sometimes a few of the pieces are missing, in which case the puzzle will be incomplete until those final pieces are found and put in place. A lack of clear goals in making disciples leads only to frustrating, ineffective, and inefficient efforts to put the puzzle together.

Nevertheless, more and more churches are at least raising questions about how they might disciple better. Particularly among younger churches, there's a desire to correct this problem—and that's the focus of this book. I want to help church leaders at least begin to think about the completed picture of the puzzle. If your church needs to tackle that issue, I pray this book will help and encourage you.

## Our Road Map

I don't know what leadership position you hold in your church, but I hope you've picked up this book because you recognize the need to make disciples. I believe this topic matters, and I look forward to walking with you through the next steps. Here's a brief overview of where we're going.

Chapter 1 will help you further understand the discipleship problem and begin to evaluate your own life and church. I will challenge you to consider what a disciple should look like in your church.

Chapter 2 tackles the most basic question we must answer if we want to make disciples: *What exactly is a disciple of Jesus?* Others much wiser than I have answered this question, and we will use their insights to inform our perspective. Thom Rainer and Ed Stetzer, for example, define disciples as “those who trust Christ alone for salvation and follow God in a maturing process of faith and life.”<sup>7</sup> Pastor J. T. English views a disciple as “someone who has received the identity of the Triune God through baptism and who follows the teaching of Christ through obedience.”<sup>8</sup> For me, a disciple is simply a follower of Christ in the process of being conformed to his image. Discipleship thus moves us in the direction of being more Christlike.

Chapter 3 focuses on first steps toward leading and growing a disciplemaking church. My goal in this chapter is for you to *start somewhere* and *do something* in this process.

Chapter 4 will guide you through additional steps to create disciples, beginning with identifying who a “disciple” is for your church.

The conclusion will leave you with a final challenge as you tackle the task of discipleship.

## INTRODUCTION

Along the way, I will ask you to evaluate your church's discipleship efforts and reflect on the ways in which you yourself have been discipled. I encourage you not to skip over these questions, but to prayerfully look at your life and your church. Honest assessment is an important first step toward improvement.

I want to help you become a disciple and make other disciples. I'm honored you're joining me!





## CHAPTER 1

# The Problem

JANIE IS A member of First Church. She became a Christ-follower at age fifteen when a neighbor talked to her about salvation. The whole story was new to her. Her parents were not believers. She had never read the Bible. No one had talked to her about Jesus before her neighbor did—but it all made sense when Janie heard it.

She attended her neighbor's church, where she was baptized soon after her conversion. It was a significant day in her life when family and friends witnessed her taking this big step. Her church family rejoiced with her. Everything changed when Janie met Jesus—even for a fifteen-year-old. At least for a while.

Within months, Janie had dropped out of church. Church members wondered what had happened to her, but nobody followed up with her. After all, it was not uncommon for excited new church members to lose their passion over time. The congregation

had seen it happen before. And they would see it happen again. Their church had no strategy in place to guide new believers to become devoted disciples of Jesus, and Janie was just the latest casualty from that failure.

Down the street at Second Church is Patrick, who has been a part of the church since before he was born. His grandparents were charter members, and his parents were stalwarts in the congregation. They taught Patrick and his siblings about Jesus almost every day. As an eight-year-old, when Patrick began to understand his own sinfulness, he chose to follow Jesus on his own.

That was many years ago. Today, Patrick is a leader in the church. He facilitates a small group, helps count the offering, and serves as an usher. Most church members recognize him as a man of God—an example for others in the congregation and the community.

What they don't know is that Patrick really struggles in his faith walk. His Bible reading is sporadic, at best. Prayer happens only when he faces something he can't handle on his own. Fasting is nonexistent. If you asked Patrick to explain basic biblical doctrine, he couldn't go far in that direction. He has not shared the gospel with anyone in years. Actually, he never has.

Only he knows the ongoing battles he has with particular sins in his life. No matter how hard he tries to overcome them, he experiences defeat almost daily. He surely can't tell anyone, though, because the church family sees him as a godly leader. It's easier to hide his sin than risk his reputation. Though Patrick is a leader in his church, he's actually still an immature believer.

How did this situation happen? Second Church has had no plan in place to disciple new believers, raise up leaders, and equip them for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). Instead, they assume that every church member who attends a small group and

the worship service will connect all the dots on their own and grow as a believer. That seldom happens, however, and Patrick is only one of several underdeveloped leaders in their church.

Across town is Third Church, where Jay and Beth serve faithfully together. They met in another church, where they also were married, but they've been attending Third for almost ten years. They joined the church when Jay's job brought them to the area. In fact, they searched for a church home even while they looked for a new residence. In no way did they want to lose the focus of their Christian commitment in a time of transition.

They quickly knew that Third Church was the place for them—but even they were surprised by what they found there. Though they had attended several churches over the years of their marriage, they had never seen a church with a deliberate discipling strategy as developed as Third's was. It didn't take long for them to realize that, although their previous churches had been comfortable fits for them, they had not really helped them grow with intentionality. They were good churches, but not strong discipling churches.

Third Church was different. Different from most other churches, in fact. Third Church had a plan to move *nonbelievers* to *new* believers to *growing* believers to *reproducing* believers.<sup>1</sup> They had a plan to make disciples.

Third Church is a community of passionate, healthy, and growing followers of Christ—the kind of church that is the goal of this book. But because so many churches aren't like Third Church, let's first think about problems that develop when a church has a weak or nonexistent plan for making disciples:

1. **Biblical illiteracy.** Listening to sermons and attending small groups are great for learning the Word of God, yet

many believers who do both still know very little of the Word. Strong discipleship *deepens* our knowledge and helps us *apply* biblical truths.

2. **Faith struggles.** This is what happens when we don't really know the Word of God. That lack of knowledge makes it difficult to trust God when we face our own obstacles and impossibilities.
3. **Inward focus.** Churches that don't do a good job of discipleship typically default to an inward focus; that is, their attention is more on themselves than on others. Only an intentional strategy to direct believers to the living Word—that is, to Jesus—and the Great Commission in the written word (Matthew 28:18-20) can change that focus. That's what discipleship does.
4. **Unsaved church members.** Some church members who've never truly repented and followed Jesus are convinced they're saved. They don't really know the gospel, nor do they know what the gospel demands. A lack of discipleship doesn't help here.
5. **Unqualified leaders.** Churches often select ministry leaders based on their faithfulness and willingness. Both characteristics matter, but poor discipleship sometimes leads to faithful, willing, yet unqualified people in leadership positions.
6. **Continual whiners.** Complaining is almost inevitable when discipleship is lacking. Baby believers remain babies unless someone teaches them to feed themselves. Babies who never grow up, but who nevertheless are put in positions of leadership, often become whiners.

7. **Sin struggles.** One reason believers wrestle continually with sin is that they have never been taught how to deal with temptation. It's tough to win a battle when you don't understand the battle you face or the armor you should be wearing (Ephesians 6:10-17).
8. **Weak families.** When we assume that couples and parents will simply "get it right" apart from the church's teaching, we're often proven wrong. Healthy Christian marriages and strong, God-centered parenting are the results of good discipleship.
9. **Powerless churches.** God's blessing falls on churches that walk with him in obedience and pray to him in dependence. Undisciplined people, however, seldom do either one—and the church goes through the motions without the power of God.
10. **Generational problems.** When one generation is not disciplined, the next generation also pays a price. The unhealthy, unbiblical cycle continues, and the church may suffer for decades.<sup>2</sup>

Frankly, at this point in the book, you might be feeling discouraged. I hope that's not the case. It's certainly not my goal. I believe in the local church, and I've seen congregations begin to address these issues in healthy, productive ways. I want your church to be one of those churches. For now, though, take a minute to evaluate your church. Then continue with me as I tell you why this topic matters so much to me.

**EVALUATION FOR YOUR CHURCH**

1. Which of the churches in the opening illustrations best describes your church?
2. Of the ten listed problems common to churches with a weak discipleship strategy, which, if any, are most evident in your church?

**If I Could Do It All Again**

I was a member of only one church before I started pastoring at age twenty. I became a Christ-follower in seventh grade, after a classmate told me about Jesus. I am forever grateful to that church in southwestern Ohio for giving me an unwavering belief and trust in the Word of God. They grounded me in the authority of the Word, and that commitment has influenced my life ever since. I would not be where I am today were it not for that congregation helping me get started in my Christian walk.

At the same time, the church didn't have an intentional disciple-making strategy. They had worship services, Sunday school, small group training—all significant components of a church that wants to make disciples—but they didn't strategically tie the programs together into a cohesive discipleship plan. They had the important puzzle pieces, but those pieces were scattered about. Nobody had put them together in such a way that we could *see* the goal.

Instead, this church was like Second Church in the opening section of this chapter. They assumed that attendance and participation in all the church's programs and activities would naturally result in faithful, growing disciples of Christ. That *did* happen at times, but it was coincidental rather than intentional. In my case, it only happened so far—and not far enough.

I was a teenage guy trying to live a Christian life in a non-Christian home with few Christian role models. I did my best in Bible reading and prayer. I evangelized a lot, but not always well. Sin struggles—and defeats—were all too common. My relationship with my parents wasn't great, and I didn't know how to change that. I was an infant believer trying to feed myself and teach myself to walk—and that doesn't work very well. When I later started teaching Sunday school, I was more excited about the task than I was prepared or qualified for it. I desperately needed someone to disciple me directly.

Moreover, I was not as ready as I needed to be when I started pastoring at age twenty. Still, a small congregation in Ohio, who knew me through a previous pastor, called me to lead them. They graciously loved me enough to let me grow through my mistakes. And I made mistakes. A lot of them, actually. I made so many mistakes that I can only thank the Lord the congregation did not give up on me.

Looking back, I greatly regret that I didn't know how to disciple the new believers the Lord gave us. Evangelistic zeal marked our congregation, and we regularly rejoiced as God saved people we loved. Over two years, we saw more than one hundred nonbelievers choose to follow Christ. Almost every Sunday, we reported on a new brother or sister in Christ. To say that excitement reigned when we gathered for worship would be an understatement—but we had no plan to help these new believers grow.

Here's what that meant: We had a lot of baby believers in our congregation who were excited about Jesus. They wanted to know more, especially after they learned something new from the Scriptures. They were hungry for more teaching, more training, more challenge. I just didn't know how to lead in that direction.



Instead, I focused on reaching more people without developing the ones we had already reached.

You can probably figure out what happened. We still needed leaders in the church, so we sometimes appointed believers who weren't ready for their assignment. They loved the Lord and the church, but they weren't always spiritually equipped for the work. They honestly thought they were, though, because our congregation had set them apart to lead. They were, in many ways, baby believers leading other baby believers. As I reflect, our criteria for selecting leaders—they only had to be faithful to the church and be willing to serve—should have been just starting points for selection rather than the ending point.

To my regret, several of those young believers did not remain faithful for long. Some disappeared so soon after their baptism that we wondered whether they had ever been believers in the first place. Others remained faithful until they faced a life crisis with insufficient faith to handle it. Some battled temptation so unsuccessfully that they always lived in defeat. Still others stayed as long as I was the pastor, but the transition period between pastors gave them a convenient opportunity to walk away. That's what happens to baby believers given little guidance and support: They wander.

To this day, I grieve that leadership failure on my part. We had passionate followers of Christ in that church, but they weren't always healthy; in fact, their passion often waned when life got hard. They didn't know how to remain faithful and joyous, because I had not disciplined them well. I'm writing this book to help others avoid that same mistake.

I'm glad to say that my commitment to discipleship improved in the second church I pastored, though I still had much room to grow. We had some intentional structure to our small groups, and our chosen curriculum led to specific discipling goals we had set.

Our deacons helped establish a new member's class designed to start a believer in the right direction toward growth. We worked hard to understand and live by biblical standards in selecting leaders. We didn't answer all the questions well, and we sometimes talked about discipleship more than we did it—but at least we began to ask together, “What does it take to be a disciple of Jesus?”

It wasn't until I was a young seminary professor that I more directly tackled that significant question. My journey took a focused turn when I had the privilege of having dinner with Dr. Robert Coleman, author of the bestselling book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.<sup>3</sup> As I write these words, Dr. Coleman has been investing in young believers for more than sixty years. He had a mentee with him when I first met him, and I recently heard him speak of a group of men he still meets with every Saturday—and he's now in his nineties! He continues to live like Jesus.

That night at dinner twenty-five years ago, Dr. Coleman challenged me: “Chuck, if you want your ministry to last beyond *you*, you need to start investing in young men now so they'll be disciples of Christ.” He spoke with such passion, experience, and wisdom that I knew I must pay attention to his challenge. I needed to become a disciplemaker—which meant I would have to define the term *disciple* and determine what it meant to *be* a disciple and how to *produce* disciples. If I wanted to be a disciplemaker like Jesus, I had to go back to square one.

My goal in this simple book is to help you tackle this task, regardless of your starting point. Whether you are young or old, male or female, lay leader or pastor, you can play a role in helping your church make disciples. If you're just now trying to figure it all out, I pray I can move you in the right direction. If you're a veteran at leading a church that makes disciples, perhaps a nugget or two in this book will help you, as well.

I know I've learned in the process of writing this book. I've been reminded again that, even though I cannot go back and correct my mistakes in ministry, I can keep growing today. Indeed, that's what being a disciple means: growing in our faith, trusting God as he makes us more Christlike.

### **With Gratitude to a Purpose Driven Study**

As a doctoral student in seminary, studying evangelism and church growth, I read Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church*.<sup>4</sup> Warren, the church planter and pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, tells the story of his church in this popular book. I didn't agree with everything he said, but it played a role in helping me think about making disciples.

To begin, Warren's philosophy of *quantity* and *quality* in the church was quite helpful. It was one of the first books I had read that affirmed numerical growth *and* spiritual growth; in fact, Warren's emphasis on *quality* forced me to remember with some grief my first pastorate, which focused more on *quantity*:

You do not have to choose between the two. Every church should want both. In fact, an exclusive focus on either quality or quantity will produce an unhealthy church. . . . The fact that many pastors wish to ignore is this: *Quality produces quantity*. A church full of genuinely changed people attracts others. If you study healthy churches you'll discover that when God finds a church that is doing a quality job of winning, nurturing, equipping, and sending out believers, he sends that church plenty of raw material. On the other hand, why would God send a lot of prospects to a church that doesn't know what to do with them?<sup>5</sup>

It's that last question that stopped me in my tracks: Why should God allow us to reach people if we're not prepared to help them grow?

At the same time, Saddleback's "Life Development Process" helped me to see how one church walked believers toward spiritual maturity.<sup>6</sup> The church uses a baseball diamond to diagram their process—moving people from one base to the next—which is built around four specific goals and a series of classes:

- ◎ 100 level classes are designed to "lead people to Christ and church membership."
- ◎ 200 level classes are intended to "grow people to spiritual maturity."
- ◎ 300 level classes "equip people with the skills they need for ministry."
- ◎ 400 level classes seek to "enlist people in the worldwide mission of sharing Christ."<sup>7</sup>

It was the intentionality of this process that caught my eye. The church seeks to grow members who complete required trainings, develop strong spiritual habits, exhibit conviction and character, and participate in the mission of God by making other disciples where they live and around the world. Gaining knowledge is only one goal of this process; the larger goal is to lead believers to show their beliefs by their actions. In Rick Warren's words, "Our deeds must be consistent with our creeds."<sup>8</sup>

The process takes time, but the goal is clear: to guide church members to become "Grand Slam Disciples" who complete their training and covenant with the church at each level of training, reaching every base on the diamond in helping the church fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>9</sup> I know churches that speak this same

language, but I don't know many who carry out the strategy as well.

Rick Warren also introduced me to “Saddleback Sam,” a composite description of the “typical unchurched” person who lived in the church’s ministry area, often with his wife, “Saddleback Samantha,” and their kids, Steve and Sally.<sup>10</sup> Critics questioned the value of focusing on one type of person in the community, but Warren was simply doing what most good church planters do: researching the people to be reached and summarizing the findings to develop the best means to get the gospel to them. He was seeking to contextualize the church’s efforts to reach their community. Other churches have successfully followed this same pattern.

Warren points out that having a composite profile of the community will “make it easier for members of your church to understand who your target is.”<sup>11</sup> As I’ve mentioned before, I’m struck by the fact that we expect missionaries to ask this type of “Who are we trying to reach?” question when they enter a new mission field, but we don’t often ask it when the people we’re trying to reach live down the block, look like us, and speak our language. Missionaries want to know about cultural mores, religious beliefs, familial relationships, worldview assumptions, power structures, languages spoken, and anything else that might help them reach a people. These are the same kinds of questions *we* need to ask, no matter where we serve.

Knowing who the typical person is in a community should help our churches strategically plan their outreach into those communities. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) requires that we seek to reach *everyone* around us, and taking the time to identify and understand these people should increase our burden to reach them. Our hearts are more likely to break over lostness when we know the faces and names of those lost people.

## EVALUATION FOR YOUR CHURCH

1. Has your church helped you to know who is living in your community—that is, who your Saddleback Sam, Samantha, Steve, and Sally are?
2. In your assessment, how broken is your congregation over the lostness in your community?

The concept of Saddleback Sam, which I found quite helpful when I first read about it, gave rise to another question for me: Once we have identified the people we need to reach, what pathway will we walk with them to help them become devoted disciples of Jesus? We must be able to describe the “disciples” we want to produce through our discipleship process.

Consider this scenario, using the names Dave and Debbie for two nonbelievers who live in your community.<sup>12</sup> They began attending your church at the invitation of one of your church members. It was all new to them, but they kept returning to worship with you. Having heard the gospel, they recently chose to turn to Christ for salvation. Now they are baby believers, like those I described earlier in the chapter. They’re just waiting for direction on the next steps in their growth.

Here’s my question: If Dave and Debbie are part of your church for the next several years, how do you want them to grow spiritually through your church’s efforts? What do you want them to know and understand? To believe? To do? What are your expectations for Dave and Debbie to get involved in a ministry in your church? Assuming they grow in their faith over the next several years, what will that *look like* five years from now? How will your church help Dave and Debbie walk in that direction? One goal of

this book is to answer the question of what every disciple of Christ ought to be, while also offering ideas for building a discipleship pathway in your church.

Why do these questions matter?

First, simply by asking these questions about your current and potential disciples, you will push your church toward determining discipleship goals.

Reflecting on years of working with congregations, church consultant Will Mancini notes that churches most often focus on *input* results (the “number of people and dollars that ‘come into’ the church”), rather than *output* results (“actual life-change outcomes that God intends for followers of Christ individually and together,” including praying fervently, evangelizing well, and exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit).<sup>13</sup> In fact, some churches focus *only* on input results, talking about—even bragging about—metrics such as attendance and giving, without ever considering whether they are producing genuine disciples of Jesus. At the very least, determining and defining your church’s “disciples” will shift your attention to *output* results.

Second, knowing who your disciples should be is only the first step in the process; your church must also establish a strategy for developing these disciples. It might be, however, that your church hasn’t had an intentional discipling strategy for years, if not decades—or ever. As we’ve already noted, many churches simply carry out their programs the same way they’ve always done them—all the while assuming that participation will result in disciples. More likely, however, they will produce *faithful participants* who are not necessarily growing as disciples.

Aubrey Malphurs, a seminary professor and church consultant, reported years ago on a discipleship study that reached at least two conclusions: (1) “[church] leaders don’t know what a disciple looks like,” and (2) “they don’t know how to make a disciple even if they

can define one.”<sup>14</sup> Far too often, church leaders have no defined goal in mind for discipleship; and even if they do have a goal, they have no strategy in place to achieve it. Envisioning what your disciples might look like down the road is insufficient if you don’t have a plan to take them there. Even having a strategy on paper is not enough if you don’t also have an action plan to accomplish it.

In my years as a church consultant, I have seen too many churches seek direction but not be willing to follow through with the necessary hard, intense work. They put together a strategy and then file it away because the work is too time-consuming and difficult. That can’t happen if your church wants to produce disciples. My hope is that the rest of this book will help you at least get started in developing a strategy.

Third, knowing the characteristics of your potential disciples will help you set a growth goal and develop a discipleship plan to give to new members in your church.

Consider the following two scenarios from different churches.

In Church A, potential new members receive basic information about the church (for example, when I first joined a church many years ago, they gave me a Bible, a church constitution, and a box of offering envelopes). Newcomers learn about the church’s history and vision, and they meet the pastoral staff. At the end of the class, they determine whether they’re ready to officially join the church.

The membership class in Church B includes the same content, but their leaders intentionally spend significant time explaining to the attendees a plan of discipleship. They want new members to know (1) why the church believes that having a discipling strategy is important, (2) what they want members to become as disciples, and (3) how they will help new members get there. In short, potential new members will hear, “We want you to be part of this church, but we also expect you to grow. And we’ve



established a process to help you grow in Christ. We won't allow you to sit on the sidelines as a church member, but neither will we expect you to walk alone. We will help you become a disciple of Jesus who then discipled others."

Which of these churches would you rather join? My experience is that many people will choose to join churches that *expect something* from them and that have a plan to help them meet expectations. In fact, studies as far back as the 1970s have shown that congregations that expect more of their members tend to be growing churches.<sup>15</sup> People will join the ranks of a congregation whose faith is genuine, growing, and relevant.

Actually, that's another reason to make sure we are making disciples: Disciples who are growing in their faith attract other potential disciples. I know *I* would be attracted to a church committed to helping me grow toward maturity while also equipping me to make other disciples in the process.

Finally, consider this question: What do you do if Dave and Debbie are part of your church for many years but are never discipled? What is your church's plan to help longer-term, undiscipled believers begin growing for the first time? For that matter, what is your strategy to help faithful, growing believers *continue* to grow throughout their lives? No matter how long someone has been a believer, he or she should always be growing in Christ. Every disciple still needs discipling—and we must develop strategies for helping disciples grow at every stage of their Christian walk.

### **Quiz: Does Your Church Think They're Making Disciples?**

It's time for another evaluation before we conclude this chapter. Third Church in the opening illustration of this chapter was a discipling church, but First Church and Second Church

would have also said they were making disciples. Most churches see themselves as disciplemakers at some level. Unfortunately, many churches that *think* they're disciplemaking churches really are not. Review each of the following statements that describe a particular type of church, and determine which type your church might be.<sup>16</sup>

1. **The church assumes it's a disciplemaking church because they affirm the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, but they don't really make disciples.** Taking a biblical view or having a theologically accurate position does not always equate to disciplemaking. A theoretical commitment to making disciples without an accompanying plan doesn't accomplish much.
2. **The congregation is "doing church," but no one is measuring their disciplemaking results.** Even if they can show numerical growth in reaching nonbelievers, they don't evaluate the other side of the coin: How many of those new believers are learning to obey everything Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:20)?
3. **The church equates disciplemaking with programming.** That is, as previously noted, they assume you'll come out as a disciple of Christ if you participate in all their programs. Programs by themselves, however, don't make disciples. Disciples make disciples.
4. **The church has reduced disciplemaking to "information transfer."** The disciplemaking process in many churches amounts to little more than attending classes and gaining information. If you can answer the questions and talk the language, you're considered a disciple of Jesus.

5. **The church has several—if not many or most—leaders who themselves have never been strongly discipled.** They're more like Patrick in the introduction of this chapter than they are like growing disciples of Jesus. At best, they're trying to give others what they themselves have never received—and it's only remotely like biblical discipleship.
6. **The church offers a lot of activities, but with seemingly no strategic purpose.** These churches have a lot going on. They might even have a lot of people involved in their activities. However, they still cannot define a clear strategy for their process of discipling.
7. **The church's discipling approach (if any) tends not to be life-on-life.** A typical approach to discipleship is group oriented (e.g., worship service-based and small group-based) rather than individual (i.e., mentoring-based). Group approaches are necessary and helpful, but they don't always include much arm-in-arm, shoulder-to-shoulder encouragement and accountability between believers.
8. **The church encourages new members to get invested and involved, but they have no clear strategy to help them do that.** In many churches, it's not uncommon to find new(er) members who want to grow and be involved, but they've heard nothing about how to make that happen. That's often because the church has no plan.
9. **The church has numerous activities for kids and students, but no one is talking about coordinating those efforts to make young disciples of Christ.** Because most Christians become believers before they're eighteen, church youth ministries are missing an opportunity if they're not

thinking strategically.<sup>17</sup> Activities are good, but activities with a strategic purpose to make disciples are better.

10. **The church may do okay at raising up people to serve within their congregation, but they seldom send anyone out.** All their disciplemaking growth is internal, which can subtly become self-serving and self-preserving. New Testament disciples, however, give themselves up for the sake of others. They'll go to the ends of the earth if that is God's call on their lives.

#### EVALUATION FOR YOUR CHURCH

1. Would your members say they are a disciplemaking church?
2. What is your assessment of your church's disciplemaking efforts?

### **A Starting Point**

Before we go any further, it's right to start where Jesus started when he made disciples: with the heart. Pastor Robby Gallaty puts it this way:

The discipleship process always begins here, with a personal relationship with Jesus. Before we embark on a journey to learn how to invest in the lives of others, we need to come back to this. The first step in learning isn't gathering information about models and methods. Jesus doesn't start by changing our actions—what we do. He first changes our *heart*.<sup>18</sup>

Discipleship begins with a fully committed follower of Christ who wants to raise up and equip others, with a goal of producing another generation of followers of Christ who commit to raising up successive generations. In other words, according to Gallaty, “Jesus expects us to be a disciple before we can be a maker of disciples.”<sup>19</sup> Author Bill Hull, who has written much on discipleship, says the same thing in a slightly different way: “It is far more important to be a disciple than to have a plan to make disciples. When people are disciples, they will find a way to make other disciples. In fact, they won’t be able to stop themselves.”<sup>20</sup>

Again, this task begins with an examination of your own heart. Your church’s discipleship can start to improve today if you personally strengthen your own commitment to Jesus. Are you walking faithfully with Christ? Is there an ongoing sin you need to confess? Do you need to give more attention to your spiritual disciplines? Have you made a commitment to invest in other, younger believers? Would those who know you best say you’re a passionate and spiritually healthy follower of Jesus?

Wherever your heart is today, spend some time with the Lord before continuing this book. Then, let’s continue the journey toward making disciples.

#### PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the three stories in the opening section of this chapter best describes your own?
2. How would you define or describe a *disciple* of Jesus?
3. What one step can you take today to strengthen your church’s discipling?