



DISCIPLESHIP IS THE
CORE MISSION OF THE
CHURCH

HELPING PEOPLE
TRUST AND FOLLOW JESUS.

BY BOBBY HARRINGTON

***Discipleship is the Core Mission of the Church:
Helping People Trust and Follow Jesus***

A Biblical and Practical Theology

Bobby Harrington

Relational Discipleship Network
Harpeth Community Church

*Dedicated to those who “discipled” me at Harding Graduate School of Religion
while I was in ministry in Canada:*

Richard Oster, Evertt Huffard, and Carroll Osborn.

In fond appreciation

Discipleship is the Core Mission of the Church

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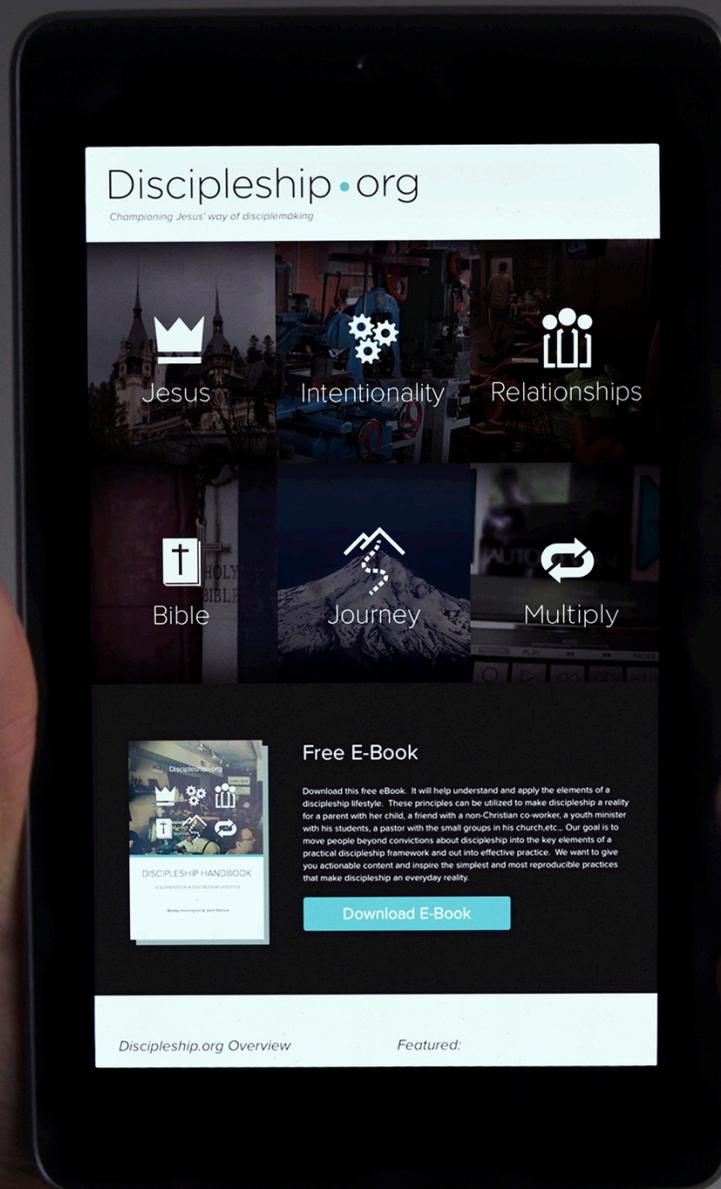
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Chapter One: Something is Not Working

For about a decade I spent a lot of time training church planters and creating church planting networks.¹ I did it joyfully. But one day, hurriedly flying out of Nashville for a network meeting in another city, a vague thought became a clear realization: I was uneasy with the churches we were planting.

Would the result of all these church planting efforts really last? Would the people in the churches planted truly please God, long term? The church planters were godly, wonderful people. The theology was good. Their level of commitment was inspiring. But the approach to church planting that we (including my colleagues in various church planting organizations) were advocating was often leading to a shallow, cultural Christianity. Too often the people in the churches that were being planted looked just like the non-Christians in the world. I thought that the character and ways of Christ were too often missing in the churches. I didn't want to come to this conclusion, but I couldn't shake it.

Before giving myself to church planting, I had reluctantly concluded the same thing about many established churches. Too often it was legalism or traditionalism or they lacked authenticity or something else that missed Jesus' heart for transforming the lost and hurting in our world. But that day I finally admitted to myself that I was witnessing much of the same cultural Christianity in the church-planting world. Something at a fundamental level needed re-evaluation.

Jim Putman, Robert Coleman and I wrote *DiscipleShift* because we believe that when it comes to the local church in North America today, something is not working. We also believe that Jesus shows us a better way. We believe that the better way comes with a shift back to a focus on discipleship in the local church. At the invitation of my good friend and Exponential Church Planting Conference guru Todd Wilson, I have written this brief eBook to make the case, from the Bible and my practical experience in church

leadership, that discipleship – especially relational discipleship - is the core mission of the church.

I am writing this book as a lead pastor, not as an academic. First and foremost, I am still the lead pastor of the church that I planted over fifteen years ago that is seeking to live out these truths. The church is Harpeth Community Church just south of Nashville Tennessee. Over five years ago, our elders came together and joined in the decision that we would ask the entire church to make this DNA shift with us. It has been difficult. We are currently walking out the last, hard implications of this shift. It would be easy to think that what I am describing is a subtle shift for a church. I have learned first hand that it is a profound one. When truly embraced, it is a fundamentally different way of doing church. But as you will see, because of what the Bible teaches and what we believe God calls us to follow, we cannot do otherwise. We believe it to be the path of Jesus. This conviction has also led me to help pioneer discipleship.org and the relational discipleship network. These organizations seek to help churches (and individuals) make discipleship a core focus.

A short book like this one is important. We want to get at the heartbeat of what a church is all about. What does God want us to do? What is our purpose? Where are we going?

The challenge is that the Bible does not come out and state the one true mission of the church in a verse that everyone agrees is a mission statement. In truth, there are various aspects to any sense of purpose or mission for the church in the New Testament. While grasping these important nuances, I still believe relational discipleship is the best understanding of a church's core purpose. I have found that this concept of our mission can provide the best foundation for everything in the church. And when stated properly, discipleship gives room to emphasize the different shades or expressions of mission that emerge in different parts of the Bible and church life. I want to present the challenge before us and then make my case for relational discipleship in your church.

The Challenge

Let me state the challenge in terms of a story that I have witnessed countless times in 25+ years of full time ministry. The specifics I am about to describe are varied, but the composite is real.² You see ... he was one of my good friends. We had really grown to like each other.

My wife and his wife spent time together and one of his kids played soccer with my daughter. In terms of enjoying life together with a social friend, it could not get any better. But there was always a spiritual barrier. He was involved in church, even helping lead and strategize in meetings. He was brilliant and he always seemed to know what insight or words I needed to get through my challenges.

Yet, he never wanted to pray, and I know that he did not spend much time in the Word. Even though he would speak up front at church, there was something missing. It was somehow shallow; few things were deep or authentically real. He would attend events and show up for church on Sunday, but that was it. When I talked about spiritual growth, serving the community, and small groups, he resisted.

Then one day it all came out. He was not only hiding a long-term pornography addiction, he had been secretly involved in affairs. He had a secret life and never really let anyone get close to him. And when the shame of his secret life was exposed, he bolted. Literally. He left his wife and kids and all of us at church. He would not return phone calls or even respond to the loving letters we sent to him. Like too many others ... he broke my heart.

He became another example of the countless numbers of people who have a surface relationship with Jesus and surface relationships with the church. They show up on Sundays, but they are just like people in the world. They have a form of religion, but it has no power (2 Tim. 3:5). They do not know what it really means to follow Jesus, to be in a church, and to grow into a Christ-like person.

The statistics do not lie ... just look at the typical person who “attends church.”³ Compare these people with people who do not attend church:

- The percentages of men who regularly view pornography are roughly the same.
- They are more than two times as likely to have racist attitudes as non-church goers.
- Domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and most other problems are the same as non-Christians.

Consider, too, the statistics about evangelicals.

- About one in four people living together outside of marriage call themselves evangelicals.
- Fewer than one out of five who claim to be born-again Christians have a worldview of even a few fundamental biblical beliefs.
- Only about 6 percent of evangelicals regularly tithe.
- Only about half the people who say they regularly attend church actually do.
- A significant number of younger adults (millennials) believe that evangelical churches are not even Christ-like or Christian.
- 60 to 80 percent of young people will leave the church out of high school.⁴

Plenty of people call themselves Christians and attend our churches, but they are just like the world. One can't help but conclude that something is wrong. Where's the lasting life change? Where are the transformed lives? Why are we not developing people who are Christ-like?

A few years back, Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, revealed the results of a months-long study into their church's effectiveness. The conclusion was that the church simply wasn't producing the results they were hoping for. Willow Creek's leaders did research into other churches across the country and came to the same conclusions.⁵

In the foreword to *Reveal*, a book outlining their discoveries, Bill Hybels wrote, "The local church is the hope of the world. For a number of years now, I have shared this message whenever I've had the opportunity to serve pastors of local churches across the nation and around the world. It's a message I believe with all my heart. So you can imagine my reaction when three people whose counsel I value told me that the local church I've been the pastor of for more than three decades was not doing as well as we thought when it came to spiritual growth. As if that wasn't bad enough, they said this wasn't just their opinion. It was based on scientific research."⁶

The results rocked Willow Creek's world. Willow Creek's leaders realized that they had to make significant changes. Hybels put it this way:

"Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he's asking us to transform this planet."⁷

Like Bill Hybels, I went back to the drawing board. I wanted to rethink the purpose and the methods we use in church planting and in the established churches today. My desire then and now is to be the church that God wants. I want to be a part of something that really helps people to trust and follow Jesus.

The Thesis

Discipleship, especially the relational model Jesus utilized, is the timeless and best methodology for discipleship. We call it the *Intentional Relational Discipleship Model*.⁸

This focus doesn't measure success by how many people come to a church, how much money is given, or even how many converts are made. These things are worth measuring, but they're always secondary. The model we advocate measures success by how many people are being loved and led into the way of Jesus? How many are coming to Christ and learning to truly follow him in the real world? It measures how many people are being transformed into Christ's likeness and are pursuing his kingdom reign.

Jesus not only told us to make disciples but also gave us a model to follow in doing so. My investigation into his life has led me to believe that his methods are just as divine as his teachings. He showed us that the fundamental methodology in making disciples is relationships. Discipleship is the focus. Relationships are the method. Jesus invited people into relationships with himself; he loved them and in the process showed them how to follow God and become like him. His primary method was life-on-life.

We believe churches honor God by moving to a model of church that champions biblical discipleship in relational environments. Simply put, a church exists to make *disciples*. And the primary methodology is Christ-like love expressed in *relationship*. Notice those two key words again in relation to what we're espousing, and keep the ideas in mind so you can begin to chew on them.

Focus = discipleship

Methodology = relationships (grounded in *agape* love)

The following chapters explain my thinking process. They describe a synthesis of biblical teaching that led me personally as I developed my understanding of the purpose of the church. Please note, I am not just saying that discipleship is the core mission of the church.⁹ I am also saying that relationships grounded in Christ's love (*agape* love) are also the environment God intended as the basis for this core mission.¹⁰

I will restrict myself in this eBook to making the case for relational discipleship. The book *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* is an in-depth manual which describes how to put these concepts into practice in both church plants and in established churches.

Chapter Two: What is God's Purpose for our Lives as Individuals?

When we first started Harpeth Community Church, a man whose son played hockey with my son became my friend and joined a Bible discussion group with me. He knew nothing about the Bible. He was from New York and, at twelve years of age, he saw his father killed in a mafia hit. He then spent the next 30+ years of his life keeping himself far from God. Because of our friendship, we talked about the Bible a lot.

One day he tried to describe what he was learning about the Bible to another man at work. The man questioned him and challenged him. He came back to me confused and wanted clarity. He was starting to learn things and he wanted to be sure that he was getting it right. "Bottom line," he said, "what is it all about?"

There are different ways that people ask the same question. Why am I here? What is God's purpose for my life? Where is my life going? This is the light in which I think the best question in regard to the mission of the church begins, not for the church, but for the individual person. What is God's purpose for our lives as individuals? These questions, Gerhard Hasel points out, summarize everything gleaned in the biblical theology movement of the last century. The fundamental theme of everything in both the Old and New Testament is God and his relationship with us.¹¹

Numerous passages point to the answer, but the most significant are the following:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but *have eternal life*. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to *save the world through him*. (John 3:16, 17)

From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. *God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.* (Acts 17:24-27)

The most important (commandment) is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* (Mark 12:29, 30)

God’s central purpose for a human life is *the development of a life changing relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.* This relationship is established by God and offered to human beings through faith in Jesus Christ. This relationship with God is developed when humans respond to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and with the help of other Christians. We then learn how to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength.

This relationship will be fulfilled at the end of human history. In eternity, those who entered into this relationship with God on earth will enjoy an ultimate union with God in heaven. The book of Revelation describes it this way:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away... he who overcomes will inherit all of this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. (Rev. 21:3, 4, 7).

God wants this kind eternal relationship with every human being who comes into this world (1 Timothy 2: 4). This is why Jesus Christ came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Human beings were created to be in relationship with God.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has it right on this point, in my opinion, when it asks the question “What is the chief end of man?” To which it answers, “*To glorify God and enjoy him forever.*”¹² Jesus Christ is the basis of that relationship: no one can come into an eternal saving relationship with God, apart from Him (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Without him, we are eternally lost (Revelation 20:11-15). But by relationship with God through Jesus, we will glorify and enjoy God forever.

This understanding guides us in how we truly help individuals in this life. Why am I here? To know God. What is God’s purpose for my life? A life changing relationship with God. Where is my life going? I can receive eternal life, which is a life that begins now and will never end through Jesus.

Going back to the question at the beginning of the chapter that my friend asked, it took me a little while to answer him. He said that he thought he told the man at work, “Every answer but the right one,” and so I wanted my answer to be clear and memorable.

My first thought was, “How can I sum it up in one line?” Because we were living in Tennessee and because almost everyone claims to “have faith,” I knew *that expression* would not work. Besides, in today’s Christian world “to have faith” means something different to everyone.

Then it came to me. God invites us into an eternal relationship with him where we “trust and follow Jesus.” This is a clear but substantive expression of what it means to have “faith in Jesus Christ” (in his life, his cross, his kingdom, and his present reign as Lord of heaven and earth). Yes, the Bible is clear, faith is the key. But I am convinced something simple and yet more specific is needed.

Faith in Jesus = to trust and follow Jesus.

I find it helpful to summarize a huge amount of biblical material by using the expression “to trust and follow” instead of faith. Faith includes not just mental assent, but affections and the will - the whole person – as it transforms my head, my heart, and my hands.¹³ I am not defining a disciple by this definition, I am just describing what the Christian life is all about.¹⁴ “Tell the man at work,” I said, “that it all comes back to trusting and following Jesus.” He was happy with that answer. I was too.

At root, we live out this life trusting and following Jesus in relationship with God and we seek to help others follow this same path. This is why every human being’s top need is to get help developing a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Helping people with this pursuit is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Three: What Is a Relationship With God Like on Earth?

Many people have different ideas about the kind of life that God wants us to have in this world. Most people get easily confused – we often equate what God wants for us with the pursuit of the American dream. Without biblical teaching, we often just assume that God is the one who will grant us, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Honestly, in my flesh, this is the kind of life I want. I naturally desire success, freedom, fulfilling relationships and every thing that makes me happy. God promises to give me many good things – including the best things, which are found in relationship with him. And there are many worldly good things that God gives me to enjoy every day too. But God does not promise “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Instead God promises me himself, his family, and an eternal destiny in his eternal kingdom. The Kingdom of God begins now and it will be consummated in something much better than anything I can imagine. Being with the father, Son, and Spirit will be sheer joy. God has promised that to us (Revelation 21:1-22:5).

This world is where I am being prepared – in relationship with God through Jesus - for the next world. I have a relationship with God on the basis of his son’s cross and guided by his son’s life, teaching, and kingdom promises. God himself, through his Spirit, works in our hearts to empower us for this relationship and *God has determined that this relationship will lead us to be transformed into the image of his Son.*¹⁵

Let’s put it this way: “We were created to glorify God in a *transforming relationship* with Him through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.” Numerous New Testament passages stress the transformational aspect of our relationship with God in this life. In Romans, Paul states God’s goal for our lives this way:

Those God foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the likeness of his son*, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29).

In Mark, Jesus himself called for this transformation.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and *take up his cross and follow me*. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, *but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel* will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mk. 8:34-36).

The transforming nature of this relationship with God through Christ is brought out in the lives of many people. Paramount among these people was the apostle Paul. He described it this way:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20).

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always *Christ will be exalted in my body*, whether by life or by death. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Phil. 1:20, 21).

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from law, but that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.* (Phil. 3:7-10).

In Galatians, Paul refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in developing Christ-like character. In relationship with God, Paul is saying, you will become this kind of person.

So I say, live by the Spirit. . . *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* Against such things there is no law. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.* (Gal. 5:16, 22-24).

Passages like these could be multiplied. The essence of life is God reaching out to us and offering to transform us into the image of his Son.

By God’s design, we become different people. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment was to love God with our entire beings -- hearts, minds, souls, and strength – and to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (more on this part below). Jesus was not so much giving us a list of the various dimensions of human psychology as he was

teaching us to embrace our relationship with God and other human beings holistically as he did.¹⁶

When we talk of becoming disciples we are emphasizing holistic development of our entire beings in relationship with God and people. We believe that this is a gradual, life long process (2 Cor. 3:17-18). God's purpose for our individual lives, as we await the return of Jesus, is that we become more and more like Jesus.

Helping people with this pursuit is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Four: What Is the Goal for Leaders and the Local Church?

I still remember the period leading up to the day when I started my first full time ministry role. I had been leading my family's trucking company and my home church in Calgary, Canada asked me to become their lead minister. Not only was I really excited about my new role, I wanted to do it very well, to please God and bless the people.

The problem was that my role was ill defined. A man in his late 20's needs a clear job description. Some of the leaders in the church thought they knew what I should do (personally pastor each member). Other people in the church had a different idea (just do what the elders said). And I had another idea (to lead the church). It was hard to clearly define my role, so I spent my first seven years in ministry dealing with a high level of confusion. What exactly was my job?

I am glad that I found clarity in the Bible. Once we know that we were created to glorify God in heaven, and until then we are being transformed into the image of his son through relationship with him, we can understand the role of leaders in God's community. A review of the role of leaders in the New Testament church indicates that their primary job was to help people with what we described in the first two chapters. In the New Testament, appointed leaders were to train, coach, and mentor people *so that they would become fully devoted followers of Jesus.*¹⁷

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, *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. (Eph. 3:11-13).

You show that *you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry*, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor. 3:3).

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Col. 1:28, 29).

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you*, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Gal. 4:19, 20).

The apostle Paul taught this same leadership goal to Timothy (1 & 2 Timothy) and other church leaders. It is the same leadership goal that Jesus demonstrated and taught – he led men and women to trust and follow him – and to become like him.

The primary job of church leaders is to guide people to trust and follow God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. A faithful church leader will insist that the quest for Christ and his life undergird all the multiple aspects of church life. In this way, church leaders have the same over-riding objective that God has for his people.

Every book in the New Testament was either written to a church or to the leaders of a church. The New Testament as a whole, understood this way, tells us a lot about the purpose of the church. It all keeps coming back to Jesus.

I once set out to understand the underlying point and linguistic structure of every book in the New Testament at a detailed level. I know it sounds obsessive, but I really just wanted to know God's word at an in-depth level, simply to honor him and be a faithful teacher (James 3:1-2). I spent years seeking to master the over-riding Greek structure and message of each book, according to the best New Testament scholars. I wanted to make sure that I got it right and I expended lots of energy and time, seeking to research this question while I completed my Master of Divinity degree. I did this for a period of about 12 years, looking at one book of the New Testament after the other. Ok, I admit it ... this was an obsessive thing to do!

Then one day it hit me: every book in the New Testament was really just written to help people to trust and follow Jesus Christ. Think about it. What is the purpose for which Luke wrote his gospel (he tells us in Luke 1:1-4)? Why did John write his gospel (he tells us in John 20:30-31)? What is the purpose of Philippians (see 1:9-11) and even Revelation (see Revelations 1:1-3)? Everything was written to help people to trust and follow Jesus Christ. The word for that is discipleship.

I found New Testament scholar Richard Longnecker's book, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, to show that the New Testament, in all of its diversity, shows that discipleship is the major, fundamental, and underlying theme of the

entire New Testament.¹⁸ N.T. Wright's *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* points us down a similar path.¹⁹

But it is important not to over-state the case. There are so many aspects of discipleship addressed in the Bible, that it would take pages to summarize them all. Here are a few samples of the ways in which discipleship is expressed:

- How do we love God, in the way of Jesus?
- How do we love People, in the way of Jesus?
- How do we worship God, in the way of Jesus?
- How do we glorify God in everything, in the way of Jesus?
- How do husbands treat their wives, in the way of Jesus?
- How do wives treat their husbands, in the way of Jesus?
- How do children treat their parents, in the way of Jesus?
- How do slaves treat their masters, in the way of Jesus?

As you can see, there are an almost limitless number of situations and circumstances when talking about being disciples of Jesus. Behind everything written that addresses these situations (and others) in the New Testament is the desire to “put on the mind of Christ.”

In fact, the apostle Paul summed up the whole of ministry in the church as discipleship with these words:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, *and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5).

These facts are important because they form the background to the summary statement that Jesus gave to the apostles and to the Christians of all time. I do not believe the great commission was given as a purpose or mission statement for the local church. But, at the same time, it is a good statement to give general guidance for the church.

Therefore go and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt. 28:19, 20).

All authority was given to Jesus. He commanded his disciples to go and make disciples. Disciples are not merely converts but also learners, students, Christ followers, or better yet, “apprentices of Jesus.”²⁰ They are people who both “trust and follow” Jesus. We make disciples, the text tells us, by baptizing people who respond to Jesus and his gospel message and by teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded.²¹

DeYoung and Gilbert’s comprehensive study *What Is the Mission of the Church?* deals with many of the complicated questions about the mission or purpose of the church that thoughtful people are asking. They thoroughly discuss the kingdom of God, service to the poor, and the place for peace. I could not recommend it more highly, especially to young leaders. They sum it all up in a simple statement: “the mission of the church—your church, my church, the church in Appalachia, the church in Azerbaijan, the church anywhere—is to make disciples of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit to the glory of God the Father.”²²

New Testament scholar Michael Wilkins puts it this way: “Since all true Christians are disciples, the ministry of the church may be seen in its broadest sense as ‘discipleship.’ Various ministries within the church should be seen as specialization, aspects, or stages of discipleship training.”²³ In the end, everything in the local church is about this underlying mission.

Helping people with this quest is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Five: Why are Relationships and Love So Important in Discipleship?

I am a relational person. Ask me what matters in this life and I will quickly tell you that, next to God, the most important thing to me is my family and friends. The thought of life without these relationships would be very disturbing to me. But the thought of life with these relationships is pure joy – especially when I am looking forward to everyone joining together at my house for something like Thanksgiving.

I am sure glad that God is relational. God was, and continues to be, in relationship with the Son and the Spirit. God is love. God's commands are grounded and summarized relationally – loving God and loving people.

Not only is God relational, but Jesus' ministry was relational. Jesus shows us the best method of discipleship possible and it was a method based in relationships. We can describe Jesus' approach by identifying four basic types of discipling relationships that Jesus modeled for us. Wise ministry looks carefully at the method of discipleship that Jesus used and seeks, where possible and applicable, to replicate it today:

1. *Transparent relationship level* – Jesus and 3 people – Peter, James, and John. These were the closest and most intense of all Jesus' discipling relationships. Jesus disciplined these men to be the primary leaders of his church. He had very deep, intimate relationships with them.
2. *Personal relationship level* – Jesus and 12 people – the disciples. These were close discipling relationships. These men regularly meet in relational environments - sometimes Jesus taught them, sometimes he modeled godly behavior for them, sometimes he coached them with questions, etc.,
3. *Social relationship level* – Jesus and the 72. Beyond his relationships with the 3 and the 12, Jesus was in regular social relationships with people like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. In fact, there were 72 men that Jesus commissioned and sent out. These were people that Jesus disciplined, but not as personally or intimately as he did the others.
4. *Public relationship level* – Jesus and the crowds. There were times where Jesus taught the crowds the Word of God. Jesus was discipling the crowds in this way – he

was showing them how to trust and follow him – but the relationships were public, general.

An in-depth study of these levels of discipling relationships can give us a model for how discipleship works well in a local church.²⁴ Jesus was focused on discipleship, but he did it in different way, in different relationship settings. Those who were to become his leaders had the closest relationship with him. Wise church leaders adopt a similar model today.

Relationships are the environment by which discipleship functioned in the rest of the New Testament too. Elders were people shepherding other people in relationship. Evangelists were people sent to reach people and invite them into relationships. Parents were people discipling children in relationship (Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:4-8). The apostles teach us that discipleship is by relationship and it is actually spiritual parenting (1 Thess. 2:6-8, 11-12; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4).

Jesus and the New Testament demonstrate that discipleship needs BOTH direction and relationship. Direction without relationship is a program approach to discipleship that says, “Read this book. Take this class. Memorize these verses. Listen to these sermons. Memorize these answers. Follow these steps.” I call this “educational discipleship.” Both the Bible and research show that this kind of “head oriented approach” is too limited and ineffective. Christ-centered, New Testament guided instruction is practical and for all of life, including, but greatly transcending knowledge and facts.²⁵

Conversely, relationship without direction results in a process that is lacking in the other direction. It says, “Let’s just hang out together. Let’s meet over coffee to talk. Let’s enjoy one another.” Relationships by themselves are not discipleship. Discipleship involves imitation, but that is more than just relationship (1 Cor. 4:16). Being with people, enjoying life, sharing pain and the like are all essential to discipleship (see Romans 12), but it is more than just relationship.

Both guidance and relationship are essential. Biblical guidance and coaching, as defined by Jesus, and modeled by the apostles, is an intentional process, grounded in relationship.

His method of discipleship was grounded in the environment of “*agape* love.” This kind of love is a love that acts according to what is best for the other person. Jesus loved people this way and he commands us to show this same love for one another. Jesus described it for us in John 13:34-35:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The last statement is a really important one in the Bible – the chief hallmark of discipleship is *agape* love. It is the most important trait by which a true disciple is known.

Later in the Bible, the apostle John describes something similar when he writes: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16). Clarity on this point is important because there are other things in the Bible that are good things that might appear to be equally important. Yet, *agape* love is the most important.

For example, some people talk a great deal about the Holy Spirit. There are many people who claim experiences of the Holy Spirit are most important. But under inspiration, the apostle Paul tell us that “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, *but do not have love*, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13: 1).

Some people might reply, "Truth, orthodoxy, correct belief, loyalty to the doctrines of Scripture, and the Reformation confessions are most important." Yes, Biblical doctrine is vital. We must fight the good fight of the faith. But Paul goes on and says, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but I have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Others can reply that faith is the key. But Paul says, “if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). *Agape* love is the most important reflection of Christ-likeness and discipleship within the church.

Still others focus on service. Those with the gift of mercy or those drawn to social justice and serving the poor will say, "Well, the authentic mark of a true believer is in the realm of service, especially in service to the poor and the needy." But service does not necessarily spring from loving others! Service can spring from various kinds of motives.

Love is more important: “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3).

The most important sign of authentic discipleship, the most important attribute of the Christian life, is *agape* love.

- It is not a Worship Experience
- It is not experiences of the Holy Spirit
- It is not correct doctrine
- It is not Faith
- It is not Service to the poor and needy

Agape love is the environment and foundation that God wants for the church. It is the first and most important aspect of the Holy Spirit’s fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:22).

The apostle Paul describes it for us succinctly:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.
(1 Cor. 13:4-8)

Let me make this personal. As I trust and follow Jesus and seek to help others to trust and following Jesus, I am to have a way about me.

I am seeking to become a person epitomized by love. It is the 1 Cor. 13 way and it is on my mind, daily. I want to become love; I want my biography to become clear to all.

Bobby is patient, Bobby is kind. Bobby does not envy, Bobby does not boast, Bobby is not proud. Bobby does not dishonor others. Bobby is not self-seeking, Bobby is not easily angered and keeps not record of wrongs. Bobby does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Bobby always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Bobby never fails.

The apostle Paul describes the priority in Galatians 6:10, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” This passage helps us to understand why the Bible emphasizes our love to those who are within the church and the family of believers. There is no more heart piercing passage in this regard than Matthew 25: 31-46. In this passage Jesus tells us that the final judgment will be based on how well our faith led us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Jesus describes those who are saved as those who “fed the hungry, showed hospitality to the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited those in prison.” The key point, often overlooked, is that Jesus is talking about how Christians took care of other Christians. Jesus says it this way, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (verse 40). Brothers and sisters in this passage (and throughout Matthew) refers to other Christians. This passage was written to describe how true disciples will love and take care of each other and that it should be an important priority for us.

This is why we say that *Agape* love is to be the foundation for everything that happens in the church. Because love is given to us as the ultimate sign and priority, it is to be a priority for us, everyday in the local church. We develop a mindset. We pursue a life of love (Eph. 5:1-2).

- Love is our mindset, before relationships and it upholds them.
- Love is our mindset, before teaching and it leads us through them.
- Love is our mindset, before tasks and it undergirds them.
- Love is our mindset, before instruction and it guides it through and through.
- Love is our mindset, before leading or following and it directs us.

It is only when love is the priority will a church be distinctive as God intends. As someone has said: In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love. Love is the distinguishing trait of true Christianity.

Helping people with this quest is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Six: What About Non-Christians, Those Outside the Church?

I have a hard time with the focus of this chapter. This is something that has bothered me from the earliest days after I received Christ's forgiveness and committed myself to him. And it has not gotten much easier as I have gotten older. I do not understand how a person can experience a saving relationship with Christ and not earnestly strive to share that gift with people who are lost without it.

The great commission teaches us "to go" and "to make disciples" of all people (Matthew 28:18-20). Discipleship is for everyone, especially those who are lost without Jesus. In light of eternity, nothing is more important than giving a person an opportunity "to trust and follow" Jesus Christ.

Some people refer to this part as evangelism, but I believe it is still best to think of it as discipleship. We prefer to talk about "discipling lost people" rather than evangelism. This terminology better follows the example of Jesus. The language of the Bible implies more than just a focus on conversion and more than just a one-time presentation of information.

Like the early Christians and Jesus himself, *we are constantly loving, inviting, and encouraging those who do not follow Jesus to join us and enter into this life changing relationship with God.* We reach out and invite those who do not know him. We reach out to those who barely know him. We will reach out to those who used to know him. We will reach out to those who are lukewarm. *We do this because we are convinced that it is God's best for everyone to experience discipleship in the way of Jesus.* There are many things I can do for others, but I believe the best thing I can ever do - if I really love someone - is to help him or her join this path.

As a Christian leader I am flabbergasted that saved people in our churches do not put a priority on reaching those who are eternally lost. The Bible does not provide numerous commands to tell us to reach lost people (beyond the great commission and a few others) *because it is unfathomable that we would need commands to reach out to lost people.* If we believe that God saved us from eternal punishment in hell when we placed

our faith in Jesus, why would we have to be told to share that gift with others? If we really love people, how could we not want to share it with them? Honesty compels us to ask hard questions – do we believe in the Way of Jesus, but not love people who are eternally lost; or do we love the people who are eternally lost, but not really believe in the Way of Jesus? Something is deeply wrong when we do not have a strong desire to reach lost people.

The root issue is that a large number of those who claim to be Christians are not walking closely with God. In the words of John 15, we are not “remaining close to Christ,” walking with him daily which produces a love for God and for other people. When we are not walking close to God, his heart for others is not our heart. God was disappointed with Jonah when he did not care about the 120,000 people in Nineveh who were facing judgment (Jonah 4). Jonah did not care whether they repented or received God’s judgment. God was heartbroken at his response! Like Jonah, why do we not care about people who are about to experience judgment in hell? Why would we think that lost people don’t matter to God?

Those of us, who believe that Jesus is the only sure way of salvation, have two questions to ask others and ourselves on a regular basis.

-Do we really believe people are eternally lost if they do not trust and follow Christ?

-If so, what are we doing about it?

We can easily lose clarity over time. We become accustomed to the nuances of the faith and the different beliefs held by different people. We have a lot of pressure today to be tolerant. We do not want to be judgmental. Our convictions get fuzzy. Is Jesus really “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)? Is it true that “no one comes to the father, except through him”? Can we say that there is “no other name under heaven, by which people can be saved” (Acts 4:12)?

The Bible plainly tells us that hell is real and most people are going there (Matt. 7:13-14). You might read that last sentence again and look up that passage. We want to do our part to reach as many as we can.

We forget that God's Glory is at stake. The best thing for a human being is to become a genuine disciple of Jesus. But more importantly, God is worthy of their devotion. God is good and those who become disciples embrace the purpose for which they were created: to love and enjoy God and to glorify him forever (Rev. 21:1ff). God is worthy of everyone's devotion. Each of us can make a difference. You and your decisions are God's plan. It may be that God has you reading this eBook for this exact reason.

I love many things that were spoken or written by Charles Spurgeon. Here is one of the best exhortations he ever made.

If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.²⁶

It is vitally important that we reach out to lost people and invite them to join with us and trust and follow Jesus.

Helping people with this quest is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Seven: How Do Service to the Poor and Discipleship Work Together?

The more like Christ we become, the better we will become at love. The greatest commands are to love God and love people (Matthew 22:36-40). We are literally, as Christians, to live a “life of love” (Ephesians 5:1). Because *agape* love is such a big deal to God, it is emphasized many times in the Bible.

Numerous passages in the New Testament tell us that we must show this love to everyone, especially the poor and marginalized. The story of the Good Samaritan may be the most important teaching in this regard. Jesus was questioned about loving neighbors and who really qualified as a neighbor. By telling the story of how even a pagan (Samaritan) knew it was the right thing to love and care for a stranded stranger, Jesus shows us that it should be automatic that we show love to all people; we need no one to teach us this truth (Luke 10:25ff).

Both the Old and New Testaments repeatedly teach that we must love and serve the poor. True discipleship will express this truth in our lives as we take care of the poor. The following are just a sample of the passages in the Bible that teach us this priority:

Proverbs 21:13 - If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

Proverbs 28:27 - He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.

Proverbs 29: 7 - The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Proverbs 31:8-9 - "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Isaiah 1: 17 - Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

Isaiah 58: 6-10 -"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? . . . And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Jesus also told us that we must reach out to others in love and let the world see our good deeds (Matthew 5:14-16).

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Jesus loved every person with whom he made contact. He loved the poor; he loved those struggling with sin; he loved those with sickness and disease . . . and he loved the rich and powerful. He was love and he showed love – that is why prostitutes, sinners, and those on the margins gathered to him. By these actions, he demonstrated the kingdom of God and served as the light of the world. We can follow a similar path in our community today.

When Jesus loved and served people he did not make it conditional. What I mean is this: he did not serve and love people (meet their needs) as a ploy to make them follow him. Jesus loved and served people to express the kingdom reign of God and show the love of God. People were attracted to him because of this love and it helped them choose to follow him, but it was not a conditional relationship. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10); he had no higher priority for people than helping them to trust and follow him (John 3:14), but Jesus did not force his agenda on people as he served them. Most chose not to follow him during his ministry, but a few did. Jesus rejoiced when it happened.

In a like manner, we will have opportunities and situations of need in our community where we will serve the poor and marginalized (however they are defined). We want to love them. We hope that it will help them to join us in trusting and following Jesus, but we do not want to force this agenda on them. We are to let our light shine; we

raise the flag of the message of Jesus, but we do not manipulate people or make our acts of service conditional.

At the same time, as people who have received the greatest gift possible through Jesus, we want people to have what we have. The best thing we can ever do for another person is to help them become a disciple of Jesus. Yet, to emphasize an important point - it is not the only thing we are to do for other people, especially the poor and marginalized. Jesus shows us the way in this regard. Jesus loved every person with which he came into contact and, whenever possible, he pointed them to the path of salvation. We should do the same.

We can sum it up this way – we love and serve and let our light shine and we seek to invite people, as a top priority, to follow the path of Jesus to the cross and discipleship with us. But love is not manipulative – either for other Christians or for those who are lost without Christ. Love just loves and meets the needs of others to the best of our ability. Love is giving, sacrificial, and free.

Right now the “missional” movement within evangelical Christianity and within the church-planting world is very strong. I spent a year as the director of research and development for Stadia (a church planting organization), seeking to help churches that were committed to the poor and those of the margins of society. It was a great experience, learning from some of the most sensitive and thoughtful young Christian leaders today. We are all to be missional in the sense that, as Jesus was sent into the world, so he sends us (John 20:21). We are sent on mission to a lost and hurting world.

As the missional movement gains steam, and as more and more churches embrace missional communities, we will see the church take on more of a heart for the poor. As the passages above show us, there is a strong biblical basis for this thrust. But there is something very important that must be said: missional movements and service to the poor will fail, if they are not undergirded, foundationally, by discipleship.

Mike Breen is one of the world’s leading authorities in the missional movement. In his article, “Why the Missional Movement Will Fail,” he describes the reason discipleship is more fundamental than service:

This is the crux of it: The reason the missional movement may fail is because most people/communities in the Western church are pretty bad at making

disciples. Without a plan for making disciples (and a plan that works), any missional thing you launch will be completely unsustainable.

Mike goes on to explain exactly what he means:

Think about it this way: Sending people out to do mission is to send them out to a war zone. Discipleship is not only the boot camp to train them for the front lines, but the hospital when they get wounded and the off-duty time they need to rest and recuperate. When we don't disciple people the way Jesus and the New Testament talked about, we are sending them out without armor, weapons or training. This is mass carnage waiting to happen. How can we be surprised that people burn out, quit and never want to return to the missional life (or the church)? How can we not expect people will feel used and abused?²⁷

Here is the way of Jesus – we are to be grounded in loving, discipleship based relationships and then serve out of that foundation. Even Jesus built up a discipling community as a basis for the mission of his disciples. Surely he wants us to do the same.

Love demonstrated in our community in this way will be a light to the lost and hurting world. And many will follow that light, and because of it, they will join us in trusting and following Jesus. It will all point back to Jesus - he is the Way, the Truth, and the LIGHT.

Helping people with this quest is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Eight: How Does Discipleship Express Itself in the Local Church?

My wife loves to visit people in the hospital and to bring food to people in need. My daughter loves to minister to high school girls. My son loves to teach and write artistic theology (interesting term? but he is very good at it). My dad loved serving as a leader in the benevolence ministry at church, to help the poor and needy. And my mother loves to encourage other women. I am sure glad that in the local church there are countless expressions of giftedness in discipleship.

The church is called “the body of Christ” and we do lots of things, utilizing the gifts of lots of people (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-30). We live out as a group, the life of Jesus. Since discipleship is trusting and following Jesus, this will be expressed in countless ways in the church as a community. Here are few samples.

- God wants the church to be an extended family, in the Way of Jesus (1 Timothy 3:14-16; Mark 19:29-30),
- God wants the church to make known Jesus and His wisdom to spiritual beings in the heavenly realms (Eph.3:10),
- God wants the church to sing and declare his praises through Jesus (1 Peter 2:9; Col. 3:16),
- God wants the church to uphold Jesus as the foundation of truth (1 Timothy 3:15; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:27-31), and
- God wants the church to be a community where Jesus dwells through his Spirit (1 Cor. 12:27; 2 Cor. 6:16).
- God wants the church to take care of the poor and the widow (Acts 6: James 1:27).

While all of these statements and others are true, *the predominant underlying theme is that God wants the church to be a community that helps people to trust Jesus and become like him.* I believe that the expression of the multiplicity of purposes helps balance and

give full expression to the pursuit of discipleship and Christ-likeness without taking away from it as an over-riding mission.

For example, God wants the church to be a family, but if the church is a family, it is not just a family that enjoys itself and becomes a Christian social club, it is a family where people serve one another and develop the mind that was first in Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:3-11). If the church declares the wisdom of God so that even heavenly beings are informed, they are made aware that Christ was before all things and all things were made for him (Col. 1:15-20). If God wants the church to sing and declare his praises, in doing so the church determines to let the “word of Christ dwell” among the members in all richness, as they sing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16-18).

If God’s people use their gifts, these are gifts empowered for service in Christ’s name, for his purposes (Eph. 4:11-16). If the church has leaders who teach and guard the truth, they are servant leaders who imitate Jesus Christ (Matt.20: 25-28) and teach the truth that is found in him (Heb. 1:1-8). If the church is the dwelling place of God’s Spirit, it is not just a community where people have spiritual experiences, it is a place where spiritual experiences lead people into Christ-likeness (Gal. 5:22-25).

There are many ways that express the Christ-like path of the church. In this light, influential church leaders like Rick Warren suggest five purposes for the church²⁸ and Thom Rainer suggested six.²⁹ Each of these sub-purposes are things that are emphasized in the Bible, as expressions of the purpose of the church. Together they say that a biblical church will emphasize the following six expressions of God’s purpose:

- Evangelism
- Worship
- Fellowship
- Teaching³⁰
- Ministry
- Prayer

Like every expression of following Jesus, each of these aspects of the purpose of the church is good. In an attempt to articulate the various expressions of God’s purpose in discipleship, Harpeth Community Church initially developed the following mission statement: *Our Mission is to Glorify God by bringing people to Christ and by helping one*

another to become more like him through Outreach, Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, and Ministry.

While the approach of Warren and Ranier is good, I found it hard to practically grasp and use in the church. I have found such statements are too broad, too all encompassing, and too hard for people to practically grasp or put into practice on a day-to-day basis.³¹ Biblically and practically, we came to the realization that we needed to change our purpose statement. Clarity of thought is vitally important in this regard. We changed our emphasis, our clarity, and our mindset as a church. We settled on a simple new focus. “Our mission is to make biblical disciples of Jesus.”

Earlier this year, I went to a seminar led by Robert Coleman. Several months later he stayed in my home and spoke at our Sunday services. He is a delightful Christian man, full of life and full of Jesus Christ at eighty-four years of age. I very much want to be like him as I get older.

He challenged me with a statement that I have not been able to refute. He said that Jesus’s method of discipleship was the perfect method. At first I didn’t want to admit to this statement because the Bible does not explicitly teach this truth and because it seems too simplistic. But his statement created a challenge. I thought a lot about Jesus and his wisdom and his perfection. And I thought a lot about Jesus’ method. Then I had to admit it, Robert Coleman is right! Jesus’ method is the perfect method.

Jesus, the apostles, and the writings of the New Testament show us how to make disciples. As Coleman outlined fifty years ago in his multi-million copied book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Jesus utilized a reproducible strategy that we can follow today.³² You can read Coleman’s book or the practical application of these principles in *DiscipleShift*, but for our purposes here, let me focus on one key aspect – discipleship involves guidance.

In Matthew 28:18-20, the great commission tells us “to go” and “to make disciples.” In the Greek text, “making disciples” is an imperative command. The passage then tells us how we are to make disciples: by “baptizing them,” and “teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded” (these two statements are participial phrases – linguistically formed in the Greek to tell us *how* to make disciples).

In this sense, then, biblical discipleship always involves teaching, guidance, or instruction. At the same time, Jesus showed us, by his life, that discipleship must be grounded in love, service, and friendship. The environment for discipleship in the gospels was relationship. Yet it was goal oriented; Jesus was asking his disciples to trust and follow him. Without discipleship, acts of love and service are simply acts of love and service. These are good things and are often the basis upon which discipleship is built, but by themselves they simply express the love of Christ without directly pointing people to Christ.

Sometimes showing love – with no strings attached - is the best and only thing that we can do for another person. We just serve someone. Maybe like the Good Samaritan, all we will ever be able to do for another person is take care of them in their need, for that time of difficulty (Luke 10:25ff). This is true love and it honors God and reflects the fact that we are disciples. But, by itself, it is not discipleship because discipleship involves directing and teaching people in the way of Jesus.

We believe that discipleship, modeled after Jesus, equals directed relationship. Discipleship is directed because it has a goal: to enable people to trust and follow Christ. Discipleship is relational in that it is always done person to person. Again, the whole process is very “intentional,” which is why it is called, “intentional relational discipleship.”

Here are ten questions that churches use to help them address how they make disciples³³:

1. How does our church define discipleship?
2. What does a disciple look like?
3. Do we have an intentional process of discipleship?
4. Does our church know this process?
5. How does this process relate to the purpose of the church?
6. Has our church prioritized distinct practices that relate to the discipleship process?
7. Does our church practice the principle of abandonment based on the idea that activity doesn't always mean productivity?
8. How does our church measure maturity?
9. How does our community describe our church?

10. Do our church families spend more planned time in a week at church with each other or in the community with non-believers?

There is nothing new or striking about these questions. But they show that wise church leaders must be thoughtful about everything we do in church.

Helping people with this quest is what discipleship is all about ...

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

As this eBook explains and each chapter re-iterates, I believe the core mission of the church is best summed up as *Discipleship*. To call it intentional relational discipleship would be the fullest statement. I believe it is the best path to describe God's purpose for the local church. I love the clarity of knowing that this approach emphasizes two things that are really emphasized in scripture, and they can provide a gateway into all the other things emphasized in scripture.

In the first part of the book I mentioned that leading our church to a DNA change along these lines has been a challenging process. It would have been easier to plant and start with the new DNA. In our book, *DiscipleShift* we point to numerous church plants that are exploding with community impact and numerical growth by following this path.

But I wouldn't go back and do it differently for Harpeth Community Church. I love the church too much. As a church community, more and more, we are engaging one another at a depth of relationship and real life obedience that honors God. And I keep learning about following Jesus and how to love better myself.

I used to read the Bible and see what it said about the Grace and the Lordship of Jesus and get frustrated with Christians for not truly following Jesus (myself included). But now, more and more, we are structured as a church in such a way that truly following Jesus is our central issue (we call it upholding both Grace and Truth). By our focus on discipleship and our relational system, we are getting into the hearts of people and showing them how to fully follow Jesus in all his Grace and Truth.

I also used to read the Bible and see what it said about Jesus' kind of love. I was gripped by love's ultimate importance and how Jesus said it is the mark of "true disciples." But too often it was just an intellectual acknowledgement that this is what should characterize Christians (myself included) without having a real-world plan to make it central to the way the church worked. We were too busy with church services, programs, and events. But now the whole church is *structured* so that relationships and love *have to become* a central aspect of our church community. We are learning how to love each other as Jesus teaches us.

It has been worth it. We remember and keep coming back to two key concepts and two key words:

Focus = discipleship

Methodology = relationships (grounded in *agape* love)

There are two passages that sum up everything that we have learned and support what we emphasize:

John 13:34-35 - "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Matthew 28:18-20 - Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I hope this provides clarity and simplicity for the direction of your church. It can make all the difference in the world.

Discipleship.org

10 Discipleship Affirmations

1. We believe Jesus Christ is central to life and the Bible – he is supreme and worthy of all devotion, worship, and emulation. We affirm the Nicene Creed and its statements about Jesus and the Trinity (Col. 1:15-20).
2. We define a disciple as someone who is *following* Jesus, *being changed* by Jesus, and is *committed* to the mission of Jesus (Matt. 4:19). This is only possible by the Holy Spirit and it is for God's glory.
3. We define discipleship and disciple-making as helping people to trust and follow Jesus. (Matt. 28:18–20).
4. We believe disciple making is the core mission of the local church (Col.1: 28-29).
5. We believe the Bible is the authoritative, reliable, and final guide for discipleship and life (2 Tim. 3:16-4:2).
6. We believe Jesus' method of disciple making is the wisest and best method to follow today (Luke 6:40).
7. We believe our love for one another is the most important sign of true discipleship (John 13:34-35).
8. We believe discipleship includes serving the poor, striving for holiness, and living with accountability in the local church (1 Cor. 5: 1-13).
9. We believe true discipleship and love compel us to join Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).
10. We believe our obedience to the great commission will result in the expansion of God's kingdom, the betterment of humanity, and God's exaltation and pleasure (Luke 19:11-27).

¹ See my book with Jim Putman, and Robert Coleman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013). With the permission of Zondervan's Ryan Pazdur, the material in the first few pages is drawn from the book and I hope they will serve as a teaser that prompts you to purchase and read the whole book.

² The following story is a composite, not drawn from a specific person, but multiple people whom I love and who have broken God's heart (mine too).

³ The most comprehensive summary and discussion of this research is still Ronald Sider's book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005). George Barna looks at the broader context of these things in his many books, including his recent book *Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World* (BarnaBooks, 2011). And David Olson describes the true state of church involvement in his book *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008). See lots of research and updates in George Barna and David Kinnaman's extensive research on these and related matters at barna.org.

⁴ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2011) and David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007).

⁵ Matt Branaugh, “Willow Creek’s Huge Shift: Influential Megachurch Moves Away from Seeker-Sensitive Services.” Posted May 15, 2008. *Christianity Today*: christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/june/5.13.html (March 2012).

⁶ Bill Hybels, foreword to Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, Ill.: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 3.

⁷ Url Scaramanga, “Willow Creek Repents? Why the Most Influential Church in America Now Says ‘We Made a Mistake.’” Posted October 18, 2007. *Out of Ur*: outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html.

⁸ The “we” I am referring to is those of us working with discipleship.org and the relational discipleship network.

⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill.: Good News/Crossway, 2011)

¹⁰ Dallas Willard, *Getting Love Right* (Amazon Digital Services, 2012). A paper presented at the American Association of Christian Counselors conference, September 15, 2007

¹¹ See related question in Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972; revised, updated, and enlarged, 1991) and *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978).

¹² The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, edited by Philip Schaff (Harper and Row, 1931), p.676.

¹³ In our network we often describe faith as impacting “the head,” “the heart,” and “the hands,” utilizing Kevin Vanhooser’s language for understanding truth more holistically, as it impacts us intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally. See *Whatever Happened to Truth?* by Andreas Köstenberger, R. Albert Mohler Jr., J. P. Moreland, and Keven J. Vanhooser (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2005), 123. Biblical scholar and early church history expert Everett Ferguson also advocates a definition of faith that is holistic in this same way, as “it involves the intellect, the emotion, and the will.” See *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 165–69.

¹⁴ See the forthcoming book, *DiscipleShift* (described above) for an in-depth definition and a discussion on the importance of defining a disciple. We show how critically important this step is for a church.

¹⁵ This transformation is a complex process which is brought about by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit as we continue with submissive faith through the holistic pursuit of truth, obedience, and faithfulness in the midst of the highs and lows of life, and especially hardship (I Peter 1:3-7; 4:19, etc.) .

¹⁶ See D.A. Carson, *Matthew* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995) p. 464.

¹⁷ Bill Hull has produced a lot of material to help church leaders in this quest. See *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Revell, 1999) for an introduction.

¹⁸ See Richard Longnecker, *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996).

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁰ For an entire book on this topic, see Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

²¹ The participles in vv. 19–20 are subordinate to “make disciples” and explain how disciples are made: by “baptizing” them and “teaching” them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these involves the decisive initiation into discipleship, and the second proves a perennially incomplete, lifelong task. See Craig Bloomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 431.

²² Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill.: Good News/Crossway, 2011), Kindle location 265.

²³ Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 42.

²⁴ Mike Breen and Alex Absalom provide more background on these spaces and church life. See *Launching Missional Communities* (Pawleys Island, S.C.: 3DM, 2010), Kindle locations 943–49. See also, M. Scott Boren’s *The Relational Way* (Houston: Touch, 2007).

²⁵ A helpful book in this regard – after the DiscipleShift – is *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), by Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, and Philip Nation.

²⁶ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/74181-if-sinners-be-damned-at-least-let-them-leap-to>, accessed November 12, 2012.

²⁷ <http://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/09/14/mike-breen-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/> accessed October 10, 2012.

²⁸ See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995).

²⁹ Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010).

³⁰ Rick Warren actually says that discipleship is one of the purposes of the church. The problem is that when Warren defines it, discipleship is more like “merely teaching” and he does not make it the underlying purpose of the church, just one of the five. Discipleship is much more than teaching.

³¹ I personally know both Warren and Rainer. Rainer was my doctoral supervisor and I respect him immensely. I am simply pointing to a disagreement on this point with two godly men.

³² Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, (Baker, 1963).

³³ These questions were created by church consultant, Sam Rainer. See <http://samrainer.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/ten-questions-for-formulating-a-discipleship-process/>