



## The Discipleship Deficit: *Where Have All the Disciples Gone?*

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If we are to devise a successful strategy of disciple making in our churches, we must first assess the gap between where we are and where we are called to go. Max De Pree, who has popularized this biblical wisdom as top priority for leaders, writes, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."<sup>1</sup>

I want to explore the deficit that must be filled if making self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Christ is to become our new reality. The purpose of this analysis is to help you assess the gap between where you are and where you want to go. As you read on, quietly pause and ask the Holy Spirit to allow you to receive the truth that will ultimately set you free.

### The State of Discipleship Today: You Are Here!

If I were to choose one word to summarize the state of discipleship today it is *superficial*. Many who claim Jesus as Savior seem not to comprehend the implications of following him as Lord.

This superficiality comes into startling focus when we note the incongruity between the numbers of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and the lack of impact on the moral and spiritual climate of our times. The American Religious Identification Survey of 2008 (ARIS), the most extensive done on the American population, found that fully 33 percent, correlating to 77,000,000 adults, described themselves as born again.<sup>2</sup> The Gallup Poll taken during the years 2001 and 2007 noted that between 38 and 45 percent of the adult population in the United States self-designated

as evangelical. These numbers scream for an explanation. How can Christian leaders moan over the moral decline of our society when at the same time so many indicate a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ? Certainly if these millions of Jesus' namers were actually Jesus' followers, we would not be wagging our fingers in anger at a civilization that has turned away from God.

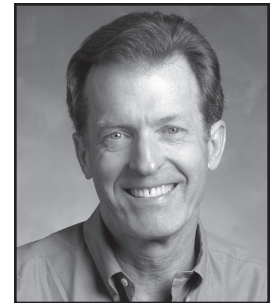
We have a discipleship deficit. How deep is it? What is the reality that we as leaders must define? We are able to gauge the discipleship deficit when we compare the biblical standards of discipleship with the reality of their achievement in our churches and ministries.

Let's look at seven marks of discipleship. At the end of each section, take the opportunity to identify the gap between the biblical standard and the reality of your church or ministry.

### The Biblical Standard and the Current Reality

**1. Proactive Ministers.** The Scriptures picture the church as full of proactive ministers; the reality is that a majority are passive recipients.

The New Testament picture of the church is every member a minister. Writing to scattered, persecuted Christians, Peter referred to the church in aggregate when he writes, "You (plural) are . . . a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). Every believer comes to God via Christ as mediator, and every believer is enabled to



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act as a priest on behalf of fellow members of the body of Christ. The apostle Paul had the everyday Christian in mind when he wrote, “To each has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). The New Testament describes a full employment plan that dignifies and gives every believer value based on the contribution he or she has to make.

Yet when we look at the contemporary church, we see a relatively small percentage of people who move beyond Sunday worship into the life and ministry of a congregation. The all-too-often 80/20 rule seems impossible to transcend. Invariably 20 percent of the people give 80 percent of the income. Twenty percent are involved in the ministry positions serving the 80 percent who are consumers of their efforts.

This means that there are a high percentage of spectators filling the pews. As a pastor, I am consciously aware that people assume their place in the pew with a “reviewer’s” mentality. The worshiper sees it as the responsibility of those on stage to pull off a highly engaging, meaningful, and entertaining “show,” while it is the worshipers’ job to give an instant assessment of the worship experience as they pass through the receiving line. Doesn’t it seem odd for people to be making evaluative comments, such as “Good sermon, pastor” or “I enjoyed the service this morning,” when it comes to the worship of the living God?

If ministry is largely being a steward of our spiritual gifts, then the task ahead is daunting. I find good news in George Barna’s finding that 85 percent of believers had heard of spiritual gifts. But the bad news? Half of the 85 percent were ignorant of the gifts they had. One quarter of the people who thought they knew their spiritual gifts named gifts that had no correlation with a biblical profile. People said things such as “I have the gift of making cherry pies” or “I have the gift of gab.” Only one quarter who knew their spiritual gifts identified gifts that had a biblical basis.<sup>3</sup>

**2. A Disciplined Way of Life.** The Scriptures picture followers of Jesus as engaged in a disciplined way of life; the reality is a small percentage are investing in spiritual growth practices.

One of the consistent images in the New Testament for the Christian life is the discipline of an athlete. Comparing the Christian life to a race, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into

strict training” (1 Cor. 9:24–25). In making this comparison, Paul raised the bar. If athletes will put themselves through a harsh regimen to get a “perishable wreath,” how much more should Christians discipline themselves because our goal is “an imperishable one”! One is left with an obvious impression that leading the Christian life is going to require spiritual discipline.

Yet when we turn from the scriptural picture to the today’s church, we observe another version of the 80/20 rule. Studies have shown that only one out of six adults who attend Christian worship are involved in some type of group or relational process that is designed to help them grow spiritually. George Barna comments pointedly on his own research, “In a society as fast-moving and complex as ours, people have to make choices every minute of the day. Unless people have a regular and focused exposure to the foundations of their faith, the chances of Christians consistently making choices to reflect biblical principles are minimal.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Barna, fewer than one in five born-again adults has any specific and measurable goals related to his or her own spiritual development. Barna interviewed hundreds of people, including church leaders and pastors, and yet, shockingly, he concluded, “Not one of the adults we interviewed said that their goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ or to make disciples of the entire world—or even their entire block.”<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard adds the exclamation point, “The fact is that there is now lacking a serious and expectant intention to bring Jesus’ people into obedience and abundance through training.”<sup>6</sup>

**3. Discipleship Affects All of Life.** The Scriptures picture discipleship as impacting all spheres of life; the reality is that a sizable numbers of believers have relegated faith to the personal, private realm.

The dominant theme of Jesus’ public ministry was the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God. The future, long-awaited kingdom had actually broken into this present darkness in the person of the King, Jesus Christ. The promise is that those who “repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15) are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved Son (Col. 1:13). A new authority is established in the hearts of Jesus’ followers that affects all that we are in all that we do in all spheres of life. In other words, we are fundamentally kingdom people. This means Jesus is Lord in our hearts, homes, and

workplace, our attitudes, thoughts, and desires, our relationships and moral decisions, our political convictions and social conscience, etc.

Yet the reality is that we sadly suffer today from the same bifurcated existence that Martin Luther addressed almost five hundred years ago with Reformation force. In his *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, Luther said that the first wall of Romanism was a false distinction between what he called the “spiritual estate” and “temporal estate.”<sup>7</sup> In Luther’s day, the “spiritual estate” was the realm of the church and its holy orders, which took precedence over and elevated itself above the “temporal estate,” which was the realm of government and the common life. Luther attempted to break down the wall between the sacred and secular, declaring that in kingdom terms everything is sacred.

Unfortunately we still suffer under the false notion that the religious realm lies in the sacred, private sphere. The sacred is associated with the church, family, and the interior heart commitments of the individuals. Religion is a private affair that has little impact on the public arenas of life, such as the workplace, politics, and other major institutions of society involving economics, education, and the media. There is a disconnect for many Christians when it comes to seeing ourselves as representatives of the kingdom of God in what we spend most of our time doing—our jobs. I find that many fellow believers unconsciously take off their “Christian hat” when they walk through the doorway of the workplace and put on their “secular hat.” It is assumed that they play by a completely different set of rules when it comes to their secular employment versus the way we live in the sacred realm.

How out of step this is with Jesus’ message of the kingdom!

**4. A Countercultural Force.** The Scriptures picture the Christian community as a countercultural force; the reality is that we see isolated individuals whose lifestyle and values are not much different from the unchurched.

John Stott describes the church of the Lord’s intention as a community of “radical nonconformity.” This phrase is a helpful summary of some of the biblical metaphors for the church. The images of alien, exile, and sojourner capture the relationship of believers to this present world (1 Pet. 2:11). The church in the biblical scheme is to be a body whose collective lifestyle

forms a countercultural alternative to the values of the dominant society.

If that was true then, what is it that people see today when they look at the church? Many have concluded that the church, far from being countercultural, does not look much different from the unchurched population. After looking at a number of categories of lifestyle and values, George Barna concluded, “The fact that the proportion of Christians who affirm these values is equivalent to the proportion of non-Christians who hold similar views indicates how meaningless Christianity has been in the lives of millions of professed believers.”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding materialism and measuring success, half the Christian public never has enough money to buy what they need or want. One in four Christians think that the more you have, the more successful you are. To the extent that the church is simply reduced today to an aggregate of individuals who shop like consumers to meet their own needs, we do not have the basis for community in any biblical sense. How can we possibly build countercultural communities out of such porous material?

**5. An Essential, Chosen Organism.** The Scriptures picture the church as an essential, chosen organism in whom Christ dwells, the reality is that Christian people view the church as an optional institution, unnecessary for discipleship.

The church of Jesus Christ is nothing less than his corporate replacement on earth. The late Ray Stedman succinctly described Christ’s relationship to the church: “The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church.”<sup>9</sup> The apostle Paul’s most fundamental image for the church is the “body of Christ.” When Paul uses this phrase it is far more than a nice word picture or metaphor. He is not saying that the church is like the body of Christ, but literally is the body of Christ. This is the place where Christ dwells.

The implication that follows is that the church is not some optional afterthought for those who name Christ as their Lord. The church is central to God’s plan of salvation. God saves people into a new community, which is the vanguard of a new humanity. To be called to Christ is to throw one’s lot in with his people.



Yet it is this optional attitude toward the church that surfaces in our individualistic, take-our-own-counsel culture. How does this optional attitude express itself?

Being integrally involved in the church is not a necessity for Christian living. My wife and I visited a well-known Southern California church one year on the Sunday following Easter. The focus of the message was to speak to the 2,100 people who had indicated they had made a decision to receive Christ during the Easter services. The teacher of the morning asked the worshippers: "Is it necessary to go to church or be a part of the church to be a Christian?" His answer? "No, it is not necessary." I had to do everything I could not to bolt straight up from my seat and shout, "Yes, it is absolutely necessary to be a part of the church if you are a Christian!" Unfortunately that is not the prevailing wisdom, apparently even from those who should know better.

**6. Biblically Informed People.** The Scriptures picture believers as biblically informed people whose lives are founded on revealed truth; but in reality, most are biblically ignorant people whose lives are a syncretistic compromise.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the trustworthy depository of the self-revelation of God to humanity. This is the historic Christian confession about the uniqueness of the Bible. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, while the Bible is the God-breathed written Word that is the reliable witness to his actions in history. Although we would affirm that truth can be found beyond Scripture, the test of what is true is anchored in the written Word of God.

Yet in spite of what we affirm about the uniqueness of this book, Christians in general are ignorant of its content and hold convictions that are contrary to its clear and central teaching. There is a surprising disjunction between the attitude that people have about the Bible and their knowledge of it. George Gallup has written, "Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don't read it."<sup>10</sup> According to Gallup, 65 percent of the adult population agreed that the Bible "answers all or most of the basic questions of life."<sup>11</sup> In spite of this affirmation, there is an appalling ignorance of the book we put on a pedestal. For example, 53 percent in Barna's survey believed that the saying "God helps those who help themselves" is a biblical truth.

But even more disturbing than not knowing certain factual data is the prevalence of holding basic

beliefs that are contrary to biblical affirmation. In a nationwide survey, 61 percent believed that the Holy Spirit was not a living entity but a symbol of God's presence and power; whereas 58 percent believed the devil or Satan was not a living being, but only a symbol of evil. Perhaps the most disturbing finding was that four out of ten people actively involved in Christian discipleship relationships believed that there was no such thing as absolute truth.<sup>12</sup>

No assumptions should be made about what people know or the beliefs they hold.

**7. People Who Share Their Faith.** The Scriptures picture all believers as those who share the story of their faith in Christ with others; in reality, we are an intimidated people who shrink from personal witness.

We are called to be storytellers. The Bible spins a love story of God's pursuit of wayward humanity. For those who have been captured by Jesus Christ, we each have a story to tell of how God chased us down and embraced us in his loving arms. In so doing, the Lord has written us as characters into his grand redemptive drama. We each have an assigned part to play on the stage of history, which is the realm in which God writes his story. As unique as each of us is, there is a common story line written into the script for each of our lives. "You shall be my witnesses," Jesus says (Acts 1:8). We each have our story and the story to tell. For it is in the sharing of the story that others come to find that they too have been written into this redemptive drama.

How are we doing in telling the story? When believers are asked if they have intentionally built a relationship with someone with the hope of being able to lead the person to Christ, only one in ten could affirm that they had. "Fewer than one in five said that they knew a nonbeliever well enough that they could share their faith with an individual in a context of trust and credibility."<sup>13</sup>

A major contributing factor to this inhibition is the intimidation that comes from living in a culture that shuns absolute truth. The only truth that is recognized today is personal truth. Any claim that there is a truth that is true for all is met with disdain and the accusation that you are being judgmental. On many occasions I have braced myself for the push-back, "You mean to tell me, if I don't accept Christ, I am going to hell?!" Each time I have swallowed hard and somewhat reluctantly said, "Jesus is the One in

whom God has revealed himself and through him made provision for us to be made right with him.” It seems so intolerant in an age where tolerance is equated with grace.

In this atmosphere of intimidation, we must ask ourselves: What do we have to offer? Do we truly believe that we have something that is so vital and personally life giving that we have something to give away?

## Where Are We Going?

Is this an accurate picture of the state of discipleship today? Does this accord with your reality? If this portrait of the gap between the biblical standard and the current state of discipleship is close to being accurate, then there is enormous work to be done if the gap is to be closed.

John Kotter, in his book *Leading Change*, says that the number-one reason for change not to occur is a lack of a sense of urgency.<sup>14</sup> Leadership is about instilling urgency, which comes about by identifying the gaps between what is and what should be in God’s scheme. It is defining reality as it is and calling God’s people to the possibilities and dreams of what God intended us to be.

It is only as we take a sober assessment of the way things are that we can have any hope of getting to the way things were designed to be. We have hope because Jesus as the Lord of the church seeks for his bride to be without spot and blemish. For it is through his church that his life will be manifest.

## Notes

1. Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1989), 11.
2. American Religious Identification Survey 2008, <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/>
3. George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000), 62.
4. Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Dallas Willard,
7. Martin Luther, *Three Treatises: An Open Letter to the German Nobility* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 14–17.
8. Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1988), 21.9.
9. Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1972), 37.

10. George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People’s Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 60.

11. Alec Gallup and Wendy W. Simmons, The Gallup Organization, Poll Releases: October 20, 2000.

12. Barna Research Online, *American Bible Knowledge Is in the Ballpark, but Often off Base* (July 12, 2000).

13. *Ibid.*, 52.

14. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 35.

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Abridged version of Chapter I of *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples of Few at a Time*

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