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# INTENTIONAL DISCIPLEMAKING

CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL MATURITY  
IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

*Ron Bennett*



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To Dad  
for his infectious spirit of adventure

To Mom  
for her persistent protection of prayer

# Contents

PREFACE	7
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	9
CHAPTER 1: Arrested Spiritual Development?	11
CHAPTER 2: Discipleship Blueprints	23
CHAPTER 3: Transformation Versus Conformation	33
CHAPTER 4: Evangelism Unpacked	45
CHAPTER 5: Overcoming Barriers	57
CHAPTER 6: Discipleship Dynamics	71
CHAPTER 7: Authentic Leadership	83
CHAPTER 8: Ministering Beyond Your Means	97
NOTES	109
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	111

# Preface

**W**HY ANOTHER BOOK on discipleship? After all, isn't every church making disciples? Won't people mature if you just offer authentic fellowship, creative worship, and solid preaching? With plenty of programs already crowding the church calendar, who has time to get more involved? Church leaders can hardly get members to serve the way it is. On top of everything else, many churches are growing and handling the crowds by offering two services or launching a building campaign.

Typically, church growth involves more people, bigger facilities, expanding budgets, larger staff, and a greater multiplicity of programs. But this book isn't about church growth; it's about depth—spiritual maturity through intentional disciplemaking leaders and communities. To assess the need for this type of focus—even within the busiest ministries—consider these wake-up-call questions:

What impact does your ministry have on the culture in which it exists? How much does it shape the morals, character, agenda, perceptions, and worldview of those in the local community? Are you acting, or being acted upon?

How effective is your ministry in populating heaven and depopulating hell? Is the kingdom of God being added to or simply rearranged as members church-hop? Are authentic disciples being made of those who convert to Christianity?

Are the lives of believers radically changed as a result of their encounter with your ministry? Does transformation take place, or do members simply conform to a religious set of norms? Is Christlikeness actually being manifested through

the lives of individual believers in private and in community?

This book focuses on changing the way you view the discipleship process. Disciples are made, not born. In other words, unlike weeds, disciples don't just happen. Rather, they sprout and bloom into full maturity when Christian individuals and communities focus on developing spiritual maturity the way Jesus intended—by closely following Him in every part of life.

Para-church ministries typically succeed in creating intentional disciplemaking communities on campuses or military bases. There, many men and women are launched into the discipleship process. However, when as alumni they move to other communities and churches, they often find a disconnect between what they have experienced and what the church at large models.

Disciplemaking never occurs in isolation (it ranges from one-on-one mentoring to corporate outreach), so how can a ministry cultivate an environment where spiritual maturity is expected and the fruit of that maturity influences the dominant culture? Much has been written about what it takes to do this. My intent is not to repeat that information. Rather, ministry leaders can use this book for fresh ideas on how to make disciples who know how to make disciples—those passionate about this Christian mission.

Your ministry may be with youth, Xers, Boomers, or a combination thereof. It may be with small groups or adult education. You may be a pastor, an elder, or a leader of a specialized ministry. You may be the initiator of a home-based church or marketplace ministry. Whatever the case, if you have a vision and heart for developing multiple spiritual generations of fruitful disciples, this book is for you!

# Acknowledgments

**M**Y BEST FRIEND and wife, Mary, has been a constant source of encouragement and support in the adventure of preparing this material. She has been my ministry partner and greatest fan. Without her support, I would never have attempted to put these ideas into print. Her listening ear and quiet wisdom have contributed more than she will ever know.

Bob Walz, along with other Navigator staff, has been a source of insight and challenge. Bob especially has been a sounding board and a refiner of ideas. His constant challenge was to say it better.

# Arrested Spiritual Development?

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

Hebrews 5:12

GROWING UP IS so common and predictable it's taken for granted. Until May 1975, when our first child was born, my wife, Mary, and I thought we could just stand back and watch it happen. We had been eagerly planning and anticipating the miracle as only first-time parents can. We had prepared the room, taken the prenatal classes, and saved for the down payment. The work was done, and we were ready!

Our anticipation heightened when Mary went into labor. Driving to the hospital, we looked forward to getting through the birthing event so we could begin the exciting process of rearing a family. We had spent hours talking about what it would be like to have a baby that grew to be a toddler, then a child, then a young adult, then a father or mother. We reminisced about our own childhoods—what parts were difficult and what parts were enjoyable. And we critiqued the parenting practices of our folks, eventually deciding what to use and what to discard.

Many hours after arriving at the hospital that morning, Bryan came into our world and opened this long-awaited new chapter of discovery and growth. However, we had barely laid eyes on him when nurses swaddled our baby boy and whisked him to another room for observation. Mary used the time apart to enjoy a well-deserved rest, and I fell into bed at home, exhausted from Lamaze breathing cycles.

When the phone rang, I thought that I must have been asleep for a day and had missed going back to the hospital to visit the family. First, I picked up the alarm clock. Before setting it down and grabbing the phone, I noticed with relief that only an hour had passed since I had returned home and hit the pillow.

Mary spoke on the other end of the line, but soon she faltered in sharing the grave news and began to cry. That's when the pediatrician gently took the receiver from her hand to explain. "Bryan is having some difficulty breathing," the doctor began. "We have checked his heart and lungs, and they are okay. We think it's his brain."

The twenty-minute trip back to the hospital seemed like an eternity as I created and recreated every conceivable scenario to figure out what could have gone wrong. Eventually, I reasoned that whatever was happening could only be temporary, given the power of modern medicine. To steady my nerves, I reminded myself that Mary was fine, that this crisis only represented a blip on the screen. We would get through it.

As soon as I reached Mary's room, the hospital staff brought Bryan to us. The wires, monitors, IVs, and attendants around him created quite a spectacle—but not for long. The doctor ducked in to apprise us of Bryan's condition, and he advised transporting him immediately to a neonatal intensive care unit sixty miles away. We hastily signed the necessary forms and watched hospital staffers hurry from the room, leaving us alone in the deafening silence of our ache, fear, and tears.

Bryan is now twenty-five years old. Although he has logged about three hundred months—9,125 days—on Earth, he has never walked, never seen the sun, and never said

"Dad" or "Mom," he has never played baseball, run through a sprinkler, or given us a hug. Immediately after his birth, Bryan became a prisoner in his own body when severe brain damage created multiple handicaps that permanently jammed his maturation process. Consequently, he has had twenty-five years of living, but only nine months of normal, healthy development.

As his parents, we love him deeply—as much as we love our other three children. Yet his inability to mature has robbed him and us of God's design for life. We have learned to accept Bryan just as he is, to relate to him at his level of understanding. Because he can't see, we simply touch. Because he can't speak, we talk. Because he can't reach out to us, we hug him. Still, we occasionally wonder what life would be like had Bryan grown up.

God must feel a similar sadness and pain when His children get "stuck" at spiritual infancy, childhood, or adolescence—when they never reach spiritual adulthood with all the privileges and responsibilities it entails. Of course, God's love remains constant and immeasurable regardless. But like a human parent, God can also feel disappointment, pain, and loss.

Certainly, some Christians remain in this kind of disappointing spiritual infancy because, for one reason or another, they do not want to grow up. However, plenty of folks get "stuck" because church leaders lack the knowledge, skills, and resources to develop healthy, maturing followers of Christ. That's the bad news. The good news is that church leaders can become more deliberate about making disciples—mature Christians who practice their faith, share it, and reproduce it in others.

Consider your church. Are the leaders committed to creating an environment that supports healthy spiritual growth for a lifetime? Are people being trained and empowered to be effective spiritual fathers and mothers? Is immaturity a result of information without opportunities to apply it to their lives? Do you expect key events alone to create maturity in each member?

During Christ's time, "disciple" was a common term that described someone who adhered to the teachings of another. The core meaning revolved around learning, and for centuries it was in vogue to be known as a follower of someone. Hence, disciples followed Moses, Socrates, Plato, and even the Pharisees. But Jesus took this common term and redefined it. He gave it a new meaning. To Christ, discipleship was following Him, not just His principles, ideas, or philosophy. It was not primarily conceptual but personal. It was not a vague ideal but a concrete relationship that had definition. For instance, He would end instructive statements by saying, "Without this, you cannot be my disciple."

An overview of the Gospels reveals that Jesus specifically gave points of reference as to what makes someone His disciple: commitment, competence, character, and conviction. While not comprehensive, the following describes what Jesus expected when He commanded the apostles to "make disciples."

## Commitment

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

(Luke 14:26-27; see also Luke 9:23-24)

In Christ's day, it was enough to adhere to a teacher's instruction. It was a teacher/pupil relationship, after all. However, disciples of the Messiah needed to be committed to the *person* of Jesus—not to a cause, a church, an ideal, or even a set of truths. For with Jesus, everything hung on who He was and is. His teaching flowed out of His person. Believe it or not, you can follow the teachings of Christ and never

really recognize who He is (as distinct from God and the Holy Spirit), much less commit to imitating Him.

There are many areas in the family of God that allow for blending and being interdependent, but discipleship is not one of them. We can learn in groups, we can serve in teams, we can worship as a family, but we can only be disciples individually. A ministry that seeks to make disciples must support the personal responsibility and accountability required in developing individual discipleship. It can use a variety of methods, but it must always bring discipleship to the personal level of each individual.

It was this principle that both attracted and threatened me in my early journey with Christ. I was pleased to discover that Christ personally called me to follow Him. I was significant, valuable, and important to Him. I wasn't just a faceless name in a sea of humanity. At the university, I was a number in a computer. With Christ, I was a unique individual.

I appreciated that God sees each person as an Abraham, as the beginning of many generations. In the midst of chaos and confusion, God still seeks for an individual man or woman to make up the wall and stand before Him on behalf of the land (see Ezekiel 22:30).

As I became more serious about my faith, I realized that Christ's personal challenge to follow Him caused me to squirm. There was no one to hide behind. He asked me to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow. There was no team effort here—just Jesus and me.

I knew my journey with Christ depended on whether I was willing to let go and reach up to put my hand in His. Each time I took another step of commitment and surrender, I realized the truth of His promise, "Come to me . . . and I will give you rest. . . . My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28,30).

Any ministry that is intentional about discipleship will encourage this type of commitment to grow as an apprentice of Jesus. Why? Because commitment is basic to knowing Christ and seeking His kingdom first. Without commitment, discipleship can't happen.

## Competence

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”  
(John 15:7-8)

One young woman had been consumed for several years with mothering her two preschool children. Because she stayed at home so much, she felt anxious when invited to go out for dinner with her husband and the board of directors from the company of his employ. She worried that her vocabulary had shrunk to monosyllabic words only, and she wondered if she could converse about anything other than Dr. Seuss or Sesame Street. Nonetheless, the evening seemed to unfold without a hitch.

She hazarded her husband’s opinion during the drive home: Had she sounded like an adult? Had she embarrassed herself or him? He reassured her that she had, indeed, sounded knowledgeable on a variety of topics and had used “big” words. With a sigh, she leaned back in her seat until he added his final comment: “Next time, though, please let me cut my own meat!”

Spiritually speaking, everybody needs his or her own knife and fork. Paul reminds Timothy to be a diligent “workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Very often, however, spiritual competence never develops. For instance, I recently visited a couple that had just changed churches—again—due to a form of spiritual immaturity. “We were not getting fed,” they complained. Certainly church leadership must feed its flock, but sometimes leaders unwittingly keep people dependent on processed food instead of helping them learn how to process their own. Immature Christians always rely on someone else to expound the Word.

Hence, effective discipleship involves teaching self-feeding

skills—competence in studying the Bible and in applying it to daily living. The disciplemaking community’s motto should be, “Knives and forks for everyone!”

In the mid-1980s, I served as one of eight elders in a church wrestling with its biblical position on a certain issue. After the pastor introduced the issue, he asked each elder to study the Bible for insight. We agreed to study and return the next month prepared to discuss the topic and pound out the church’s official position.

When we reassembled, the pastor revisited the issue and asked for discussion. He met silence! Only he and I had done any personal study. One elder even turned to me and whispered, “I don’t know why he is making such a big deal out of this. Why doesn’t he just tell us what the answer is so we can get on with the rest of the agenda?” This man never put his hands on his knife and fork. In fact, he had no interest in using them, much less in becoming competent.

## Character

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

Love is the most telling hallmark of an authentic Christian disciple. Of course, knowledge and service stem from the growth process, too. But without love, your credibility both inside and outside of the family of God dwindles. Love is so key to Christian maturity that the Bible says nonChristians can assess you based on its evidence. But to love the way Christ loves takes spiritual depth; it takes Christlike character.

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes,

Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater

number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths.<sup>1</sup>

However, if we fail to place character-developing spiritual disciplines in a context of grace, they can get distorted into legalistic discouragements. Furthermore, while character development through various disciplines encourages spiritual maturity, everyone must understand that leading a more disciplined, spiritually mature life cannot make anyone more or less acceptable to God.

Rather, the discipleship growth process involves a marvelous mix of human discipline and God's grace. Remember the apostle Paul's emphasis on putting off the old man and putting on the new? Transformation and maturity result not only from the discipline of the individual, but also from the work of God's Spirit. For instance, the "God is at work in you" concept in Philippians 2:13 focuses on divine influence. On the other hand, the idea of working out your own salvation, as mentioned in the preceding verse (2:12), focuses on the *ways*, or disciplines, we pursue to work it out.

Foster categorizes spiritual disciplines as

- inward (meditation, prayer, fasting, study),
- outward (simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and
- corporate (confession, worship, guidance, celebration).

When I got involved with The Navigators ministry as a college student more than thirty years ago, I was disciplined around the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and witnessing. Each approach supports character development, so long as it promotes Christlikeness.

## Conviction

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" still sprawls over the heavy, giant doors of the Gothic library at my alma mater, Iowa State University in Ames (see John 8:32). But I never believed that knowing what was in that library would lead to freedom. Rather, I understood that verse in its original Christian context—that understanding God's truth and realizing His authority lead to freedom.

It is not the *knowing* but the *holding* of truth that marks someone as a disciple of Christ. Too often, Christians are knowledge rich, but application poor. We pride ourselves in having "right" doctrine, but without conviction—the kind that leads to commitment, competence, and character development—our lifestyles differ little from the cultural norm and don't even hint at Christ within us.

It is not surprising that both Paul and Peter had an image of spiritual maturity in mind as they carried out their ministries. They knew what it looked like and had a plan to encourage the critical process that produced it.

For instance, during his ministry Paul wrote to churches operating at different stages of collective maturity, dealing with a variety of problems over a number of years. Despite the churches' differing circumstances, a discipleship pattern emerged in his letters. He placed Christ at the foundation of the community, and then he added three levels consisting of faith, hope, and love. He either commended the individual church for following this building plan or exhorted the church for not following the plan. These four themes—Christ, faith, hope, and love—are interrelated and essential for spiritual maturity, and Paul drove them home at every opportunity.

"How can you recognize maturity in a church?" asks Gene Getz in *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*. "Maturity in the body of Christ can be identified by the enduring virtues. The degree of completeness can be measured by the degree to which the church manifests faith, hope and love."<sup>2</sup>

Peter also wrote to believers scattered throughout the Roman world to remind them that spiritual maturity involves

acquiring a divine nature: qualities that stem from Christ's character. Peter encouraged believers to "make every effort" to grow in this way:

Add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-8)

In addition to identifying the qualities of spiritual maturity, Peter recognized the process of building one virtue on top of another. Both Peter and Paul understood that spiritual maturity comes not simply from a design, but from great effort. It begins with personal effort and can be encouraged in a discipling community.

At The Chapel in Akron, Ohio, Senior Pastor Knute Larson's concern about the need for adult fellowship prompted him to develop Adult Bible Fellowships (ABFs) and to write *The ABF Book* (The Chapel Press, 1991). ABFs organize Sunday school classes around more-focused Bible study and fellowship. Today, twenty years later, the three pilot ABFs have grown to as many as fifty. That's fifty groups of people discovering the beauty of group Bible study and fellowship. But are those people becoming disciples?

The Chapel's leadership tried answering that question with conviction by exploring the biblical concept of individual discipleship. This team underwent a two-year process of identifying what kind of person the church should be trying to develop. The process started at a pastoral retreat in the fall of 1996 as they attempted to answer how the Bible characterizes a mature Christian believer and what The Chapel's role should be in facilitating that process.

Ultimately, the leaders—under their pastor of discipleship, Jay Halley—outlined seven characteristics that now

form the core of The Chapel's discipling environment: learner, reproducer, server, relater, worshiper, restorer, and giver. The church uses the manifestation of these characteristics in the lives of its members to determine its success in developing spiritually mature believers.

To stay sharp, the leader of each church program periodically evaluates how that program contributes to the seven characteristics of a disciple. The church also asks each person to candidly assess his or her spiritual journey so it can continue to enhance the growth process in these seven areas—and to prevent the tragedy of arrested development.

# PRACTICAL DISCIPLESHIP FOR EVERYDAY BELIEVERS

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