

“Bill Hull provides a comprehensive guide to the central issue of contemporary Christianity: discipleship of Jesus Christ. Those already aware of Bill’s continuing leadership in this arena will not be disappointed. Essential reading for anyone concerned about being truly Christian in the twenty-first century!”

—LARRY HART, PhD professor of Systematic Theology,
Oral Roberts School of Theology

“Bill Hull is the modern voice on disciple-making for the church. His writings never fail to convict me, provoke me, and move me to action. This latest work has what I have been hungry for: a historical perspective on disciple-making with a helpful bibliography and introduction to little-known masters. I will use this book with my leadership as we seek to be faithful to Jesus’ Great Commission. May it find a broad readership in the church!”

—SANDY MASON church planter and senior pastor,
Desert View Bible Church, Phoenix, Arizona

“In the last fifty years, the U.S. Church has been duped into substituting quality of church programs for quality of individual *Christlikeness*, and the result is too many churches with too few disciples! *The Complete Book of Discipleship* is a real treasure of motivation, ideas, and applications to help counter-balance this problem. No other book provides so much practical help in making disciples in the local church.”

—BOB GILLIAM President, T-NET International

THE NAVIGATORS REFERENCE LIBRARY

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF
DISCIPLESHIP
ON BEING AND MAKING FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

BILL HULL



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE



OUR GUARANTEE TO YOU

We believe so strongly in the message of our books that we are making this quality guarantee to you. If for any reason you are disappointed with the content of this book, return the title page to us with your name and address and we will refund to you the list price of the book. To help us serve you better, please briefly describe why you were disappointed. Mail your refund request to: NavPress, P.O. Box 35002, Colorado Springs, CO 80935.

The Navigators is an international Christian organization. Our mission is to reach, disciple, and equip people to know Christ and to make Him known through successive generations. We envision multitudes of diverse people in the United States and every other nation who have a passionate love for Christ, live a lifestyle of sharing Christ's love, and multiply spiritual laborers among those without Christ.

NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators. NavPress publications help believers learn biblical truth and apply what they learn to their lives and ministries. Our mission is to stimulate spiritual formation among our readers.

© 2006 by Robert W. Hull

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from NavPress, P.O. Box 35001, Colorado Springs, CO 80935.
www.navpress.com

NAVPRESS, BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE, and the NAVPRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

ISBN 1-57683-897-8

Cover design by Wes Youssi / www.thedesignworksgroup.com

Cover image by Martin Barraud

Creative Team: Kent Wilson, Brad Lewis, Amy Spencer, Darla Hightower, Arvid Wallen, Pat Reinheimer, Brooke Graves

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Unless otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® (NIV®). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Other versions used include: the *Revised Standard Version Bible* (RSV), copyright 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, used by permission, all rights reserved; *The New English Bible* (NEB), © 1961, 1970, The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press; *New King James Version* (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved; and the *King James Version* (KJV).

Hull, Bill, 1946-

The complete book of discipleship / Bill Hull.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57683-897-8

1. Discipling (Christianity) 2. Spiritual formation. 3. Christian life. 4. Church history. I. Title.

BV4520.H7795 2006

253--dc22

2006016252

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 / 10 09 08 07 06

FOR A FREE CATALOG OF NAVPRESS BOOKS & BIBLE STUDIES,
CALL 1-800-366-7788 (USA) OR 1-800-839-4769.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Merger	18
Classic Discipleship	18
Spiritual Formation	18
Environmental Discipleship	20
A New Monasticism: Nothing Like the Old	20

CHAPTER 1: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship: God's Very Best for His People	24
Discipleship: God's Primary Work	25
Jesus Said So	25
God Gave His All to This Mission	26
A Transformed Person Can Change the World	27
A Company of the Committed	28
Learning to Obey	30
Defining Terms	32
Disciple	32
Disciple-Making	34
Discipleship	35
Spiritual Formation	35
What Discipleship Is Not	35
Not a Program	36
Not a Production Line	36
Not Just for Beginners	37
Not Just for Leaders	38
Not Just for the Highly Literate	39
Not Just for People Who Like Structure	40
The Creation of a Non-Discipleship Christianity	41

Does Non-Discipleship Christianity Make Disciples?	41
Exploring a Faith That Embraces Discipleship	44
The Great Cloud of Witnesses	45
Characteristics of a Faith That Embraces Discipleship	46
The Kind of Person the Gospel Can Create	47
Personal Characteristics of Disciples	47
Personal Competencies of Disciples	47

CHAPTER 2:
ORIGINS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Pre-Christian Examples of Discipleship	52
The Greco-Roman World	53
The Semitic World of the Hebrews	55
The Prophets	57
Wise Men and Scribes	58
Discipleship During the Time of Christ	59
The Pharisees	59
Disciples of John the Baptist	60
The Separatist Disciples	60
The Zealots	61
Characteristics of the Rabbinical Tradition	62
First-Century Discipleship	62
The Uniqueness of Jesus' Discipleship	65
Unique in Whom He Chose	65
Uniquely Based on Friendship and Common Respect	66
Unique Because It Redefined <i>Disciple</i>	67
Unique in How We Should Apply It Now	68
Is This Kind of Discipleship Common Today?	69
A Disciple Submits to a Teacher	70
A Disciple Finds and Teaches Other Disciples	71

CHAPTER 3:
THE STORY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Bishops as Spiritual Guides	74
Clement of Rome	75
Ignatius of Antioch: The Bishop of Bishops	76
Polycarp of Smyrna	78
When We Were All Catholics	80
Monks and Mavericks	81
Characteristics of Monks	82
God in the Ordinary: Benedict and the Benedictines	83
Live Like Christ and Love the Poor: Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans	84
Intellectual Life: Dominic and the Dominicans	85
The Middle Years	88
The Eucharist	89
Community Worship	90
Art	91
The Reformation: New Life	95
Courage: Martin Luther	96
Spiritual Basics: John Calvin	97
Personal Devotions for Every Person: Thomas Cranmer	98
Disciplines of the Inner Life: Philip Jacob Spener	99
Community: Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf	101
Discipleship Done Right: John Wesley	102
A Gospel That Embraces Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer	104

CHAPTER 4:
THE DISTINGUISHING MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

The Imitation of Christ	114
“Imitate Me”	114
Why Imitate Christ?	115
The Call to Discipleship	116

The Urge to Follow Jesus	117
The Call to the Life	117
Anyone Can and Should	119
Self-Denial Is Essential	121
Take Up Your Mission	124
The Torment of the Daily	127
Gaining Your Soul	127
The Six-Fold Definition of Being Conformed to Christ's Image	130
1. Transformed Mind: Believe What Jesus Believed	130
2. Transformed Character: Live the Way Jesus Lived	135
3. Transformed Relationships: Love as Jesus Loved	139
4. Transformed Habits: Train as Jesus Trained	142
5. Transformed Service: Minister as Jesus Ministered	144
6. Transformed Influence: Lead the Way Jesus Led	149

CHAPTER 5:
THE DISCIPLE-MAKING ENVIRONMENT:
WHAT MAKES THINGS GROW

How Environment Affects Growth	154
Too Close and Too Demanding:	
The Parable of the Turtle	154
Necessary Ingredients for a Healthy Environment	155
Trust	156
Grace	157
Humility	158
Submission	158
Affirmation	159

CHAPTER 6:
THE STAGES OF DISCIPLESHIP

Maturity: A Community Project	164
Phases, Stages, and Steps of Spiritual Development	165
Eight Steps for Training Disciples	166

The Diamond of Discipleship	168
Sequential and Segmented	169
Jesus' Model for Developing Followers	169
Come and See	170
Come and Follow Me	175
Come and Be with Me	178
Remain in Me	181

CHAPTER 7:

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

The Transformational Triangle	188
Community	188
The Holy Spirit and Scripture	190
Training and Pattern of Life	190
Events and Circumstances	191
Mission	191
The Whole Triangle	192
The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Transformation	193
Why Practice Spiritual Disciplines?	194
Principle 1: Training Leads to Godliness	197
Principle 2: Practice Creates the Trained State	199
Principle 3: Perseverance Makes Transformation a Reality	203

CHAPTER 8:

PERSONAL APPROACHES TO DISCIPLE-MAKING

The Personal Dimension	210
Coaching: Skills and Task	210
A Coaching Primer	211
The Coach's Function	212
The Ten Commandments of Coaching	213
Mentoring: Becoming a Person	214
Mentored to Be a New Person in Christ	216
Mentored by God's Word	217

Mentored for Worship in Community	218
Spiritual Direction: Specific Soul Care	221
Characteristics of a Spiritual Director	222
Distinctives of Spiritual Direction	222
Choosing a Spiritual Director	223

CHAPTER 9:

THE ROLE OF SMALL GROUPS IN DISCIPLESHIP

Principles for Starting Groups	229
Establish a Beachhead	229
Orientation	229
The Prototype	230
Customize the Group	230
Types of Small Groups	230
Covenant Groups	231
Support Groups	231
Basic Accountability Groups	231
Ongoing Accountability Groups	232
Open and Closed Groups	232
Basic Principles for Every Group	234
Be Intentional	234
Provide Structure	235
Strive for Intimacy	235
Insist on Outreach	235
Commit to Reproduce	236
Personal Preparation for Starting Groups	237
Various Start-Up Methods	238
Develop a Master Group	238
Use the Quick-Start Approach	239
Inspire and Hand Out Materials	239
Communicate the Reason for Small-Group Ministry	240
A Sample Approach	240

Selecting Leaders	242
Character	242
Suitability	242
Availability	243
Faithfulness	243
Training Leaders	244
Establish a Covenant Relationship	244
Hold Regular Leader Meetings	244
Hold One-on-One Meetings	245
Encourage Playtime	245
Provide Continuing Education	245
Management of Commitments	246
Establish Accountability and Support	246
Set a Structure	246
Work Out Problems	247

CHAPTER 10:

CONGREGATIONS, PASTORS, AND DISCIPLESHIP

Is Bigger Better?	252
Quality over Quantity	254
How Local Congregations Differ from Other Ministries	254
Church Is Ordinary	254
Church Is a Product of the Consumer Culture	255
Different Levels of Spiritual Maturity	256
The Seeker	256
The Starter	257
The Struggler	257
The Stagnant	259
The Stable	260
Training and Organizing the Congregation	260
Start at the Beginning	261
Realize That Some Will Always Be Spectators	262

Use a Development System	262
Use Careful Management	262
Advice to Church Leaders	263
Give Up the Gods	264
Develop Your Inner Life	269
Give Yourself to the Principle of Discipleship	270
Give Yourself to Others	273

CHAPTER 11:
SPIRITUAL GENERATIONS

The Responsibility to Reproduce: A Sacred Trust	281
Needed: Both a Paul and a Timothy	282
Reproduction Requires Intentional Repeated Action	283
The Qualities of Reproduction and Multiplication	284
Proper Selection of Personnel	284
Several Passes on the Sacred Deposit	284
Passing on to the Right People	285
Imitation, Not Impersonation	286
What Can Be Passed On	287

CHAPTER 12:
THE FUTURE OF DISCIPLESHIP:
LIVING THE JESUS WAY

A Challenge and a Worry	290
The Right Thing in the Wrong Way	292
Two Philosophies	292
The Jesus Way or the Consumer Way?	294
1. Competence Before Prayer	294
2. Individualism Instead of Congregation	295
3. Impatience Rather Than Endurance	296
4. Celebrity Over Humility	298
Choosing the Jesus Way	299

APPENDIX A:
FIVE MODELS OF EFFECTIVE DISCIPLESHIP

The Competencies Model:	
Pantego Bible Church, Dallas	303
The Missional Model:	
Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas	304
The Neighborhood Model: Perimeter Church, Atlanta	305
The Worldview Model:	
Fellowship Bible Church North, Plano, Texas	306
The Lecture-Lab Model:	
North Coast Church, Vista, California	307
A “Best of” Model	307

APPENDIX B:
RESEARCH FOR EVALUATING CONGREGATIONS

Why Congregations Do Poorly	309
What Makes Churches Effective at Disciple-Making	310
Notes	313
Index	329
Author	347

INTRODUCTION

“Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”¹

The reasoning behind this dramatic statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides the rationale for this book. Without discipleship, Christianity doesn't exist, because following Jesus activates the Christian faith.

Bonhoeffer expanded his thought:

Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are essentially inimical [detached] to the whole conception of following Christ. With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.

It remains an abstract idea, a myth that has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. A Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship.²

Unfortunately non-discipleship “Christianity” dominates much of the thinking of the contemporary church. In addition to sucking the strength from the church, Christianity without discipleship causes the church to assimilate itself into the culture. And sadly, whenever the difference between the church’s and culture’s definition of morality ceases to exist, the church loses its power and authority.

Many mainline churches depart from orthodoxy because they reject the absolute authority of Scripture. However, many evangelical churches pose an even more subtle danger by departing from the gospel that calls on all believers to be disciples and follow Christ in obedience. As a result, we evangelicals accept and even encourage a two-level Christian experience in which only serious Christians pursue and practice discipleship, while grace and forgiveness is enough for everyone else. Dallas Willard notes, “We have not only been saved by grace, we have been paralyzed by it.” Willard adds that the church stresses who is saved and who isn’t. However, when we see faith as agreement with a doctrinal test and understand grace as forgiveness of sin alone, we lose the idea that discipleship is normal. And when we lose discipleship, we also lose vibrant Christianity.

Willard both defines and describes discipleship: “Discipleship is the relationship I stand into Jesus Christ in order that I might take on his character. As his disciple, I am learning from him how to live my life in the Kingdom as he would if he were I. The natural outcome is that my behavior is transformed. Increasingly, I routinely and easily do the things he said and did.”³ In other words, we can’t truly follow Christ without desiring to become like him. Following

him requires regeneration or new birth. If we're reborn, we'll follow him — unless we're taught that we don't need to.

I'm going to reveal my heart early in this book with the following statement: I find it both sad and appalling that we've used the great doctrine of justification by faith and God's grace to teach that people don't really need to follow Jesus to be Christians.

My heart tells me that it's time to speak up! The goal of this book is to address the mistakes we've made with discipleship, including making it a limited training period for spiritual newbies, and allowing the consumer culture of the contemporary church to diminish the radical nature of following Jesus.

Further, this book will encourage those with an intense hunger to follow Jesus and who desire to help others do the same. I'm referring to the kind of person the great scholar Augustine described:

Give me a man in love; he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal Country. Give me that sort of man; he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just doesn't know what I am talking about. . . . You are surprised that the world is losing its grip? That the world is grown old? Don't hold onto the old man, the world; don't refuse to regain your youth in Christ, who says to you: "The world is passing away; the world is losing its grip, the world is short of breath." Don't fear, for thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle.

If you feel a fire burning in your soul when it comes to discipleship, you know what I mean — and this book is for you.

THE MERGER

Although many mergers don't work, some do. Fortunately, a merger of three streams of thought regarding discipleship now taking place seems to be born of God's Spirit, bringing new and vibrant life to the people of God. Let's take a brief look at those streams.

Classic Discipleship

The first stream, classic discipleship, gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century with the rise of organizations such as The Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ.

The characteristics of classic discipleship included one-on-one mentoring, a disciplined program of Bible study, Scripture memorization, and training in witnessing and speaking. Classic discipleship made significant inroads into the church as the baby boomers it reached became pastors and leaders of the church. In addition, the movement produced its own literature, music, and curriculum.

The strengths of the classic discipleship movement include focus, method, and the ability to process large numbers of people through a curriculum. However, classic discipleship didn't address the disciple's inner life as much as it measured performance. As a result, people grew weary of a spirituality that required completing programs but often didn't offer lasting change. For many people, as soon as the program ended, so did their growth.

The essential and lasting strength of classic discipleship is its commitment to Scripture and the importance of sequence and segmentation in training people well.

Spiritual Formation

The spiritual formation movement recaptured ancient exercises practiced by Jesus, his disciples, and the monastics. Following the Reformation, Protestants had stripped the gospel of its imagination

by throwing out many ancient practices: the Eucharist, holy days to remember saints, church calendars, sacraments, icons, and art. However, Anglicans, desiring to benefit from their own reformation yet maintain the positives of their Catholic heritage, continued many of these practices.

By definition, spiritual formation is a process through which individuals who have received new life take on the character of Jesus Christ by a combination of effort and grace. The disciple positions himself to follow Jesus. The actual process of reforming, or spiritual formation, involves both God's grace and the individual's effort.

The weakness of the spiritual formation movement—at least from an evangelical viewpoint—includes its associations with theological liberalism. These connections sometimes made the movement susceptible to infiltration from secular worldviews, other religions, and Eastern philosophy. Thus it became important to distinguish the movement as “Christian spiritual formation.”

Fortunately, the richness of the ancient traditions emerged from behind monastery walls and outside the ivy-covered halls of academia, finding its way into the mainstream of evangelical interaction. As a result, the spiritual formation movement introduced practices such as silence, solitude, frugality, meditation on Scripture, and filling instead of emptying the mind. This movement also espoused more ancient ways of reflecting on Scripture for life application rather than simply accumulating more biblical data.

One of spiritual formation's greatest strengths is that it causes us to slow down twenty-first-century life long enough to ponder what's going on in us and around us. Recently the spiritual formation movement has also incorporated the focused and “let's get things done” nature of the classic discipleship movement, creating a richer and more thoughtful approach to transformation.

Environmental Discipleship

Some might call this third-stream psychological discipleship or relational discipleship. Other associated words include *community* and *congregation*. In essence, this movement encompasses the ways people get along.

One of the least-developed concepts in discipleship has been how the environment of a group determines what grows or dies within that environment. The most important issues in spiritual transformation are the presence of acceptance, integrity of relationships, and trust. The classic discipleship movement mandated trust: “You must be accountable to me.” The spiritual formation movement required submission: “If you want to be a part of our society, you must subject yourself fully to it. No negotiations.”

The therapeutic society we live in has developed its own environment, which accepts nearly anything, no matter how damaging it might be. The culture has determined that intolerance is the only real sin; it labels conviction as hate speech. Fortunately, some thoughtful Christians have “spoiled” the therapeutic world, introducing some very important insights that create trust and allow disciples to flourish.

A NEW MONASTICISM: NOTHING LIKE THE OLD

These three movements—classic discipleship, spiritual formation, and environmental discipleship—are now converging to create a new, full-bodied discipleship, with the potential to transform the church in the next twenty-five years. Of course, this merged form of discipleship will be of little or no significance if it doesn’t lead to the transformation of millions now outside of Christ and change the cultures we all live in.

My goal in this book is not just to recap some current methods and explore a few of the latest ideas concerning discipleship. Rather it is to delve into some very old but proven ideas that have changed the world. As you read, I hope these ideas will revolutionize both you and those you touch.

CHAPTER 1

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

IN THIS CHAPTER

- DISCIPLESHIP: GOD'S VERY BEST FOR HIS PEOPLE
- DISCIPLESHIP: GOD'S PRIMARY WORK
- DEFINING TERMS:
 - DISCIPLE
 - DISCIPLE-MAKING
 - DISCIPLESHIP
 - SPIRITUAL FORMATION
- NON-DISCIPLESHIP CHRISTIANITY
- EXPLORING A FAITH THAT EMBRACES DISCIPLESHIP
- THE KIND OF PERSON THE GOSPEL CAN CREATE

For two years, one of my friends followed the rock group The Grateful Dead. He was known as a Deadhead. He didn't follow The Dead casually like a fan who follows baseball. He traveled from city to city, living out of his car. He wanted to live the same life the band lived.

My friend might have been misguided, but he was totally committed. He was a true disciple in much the same way the New Testament describes discipleship.

DISCIPLESHIP: GOD'S VERY BEST FOR HIS PEOPLE

Jesus taught that faith means to follow. That was his first test of a person's faith (see Luke 9:23-25). Following, however, isn't short term. Discipleship isn't a program or an event; it's a way of life. It's not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn't for beginners alone; it's for all believers for every day of their life. Discipleship isn't just *one* of the things the church does; it *is* what the church does. It's not just part of the advancement of God's kingdom; the existence of serious disciples is the most important evidence of God's work on earth. Without enough of these workers, the task languishes and the work remains incomplete (see Matthew 9:35-38).

Simply, discipleship means learning from and following a teacher. However, while we can define discipleship in these simple terms, something about the discipleship movement has never quite made it into the heart of the church. I find it particularly puzzling that we struggle to put disciple-making at the center of ministry even though Jesus left us with the clear imperative to "make disciples" (see Matthew 28:18-20).

So why don't we automatically place discipleship at the center of every ministry? Perhaps certain words put people off: influence, vision, submission, accountability, vulnerability, confession, study, sacrifice, and discipline. With just a few powerful words, the apostle Paul touched on another reason people tend to avoid discipleship: "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Timothy 4:7). Let's face it—discipline isn't something most of us like. We avoid discipline if we can, because it disrupts the normal and comfortable pattern of our life.

The great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis wrote that the word he detested most was "interference."¹ Interference occurs when someone sticks his nose in your business. However, that's precisely what discipleship is all about. If you want to grow in a meaningful

way, you not only must tolerate another person's intimate knowledge of you, you must also willingly invite that person into your life. Even more startling, you'll grow to love and depend on the "interference."

Most of us want to reap the harvest of a discipline while living a life of relative sloth. We want all the benefits of humility and growth without being humble or working to grow. Yet Scripture states clearly that we require a great deal of interference to stem the tide of our self-indulgence. This positive interference lies at the very heart of making disciples—a process Jesus described as teaching others "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

DISCIPLESHIP: GOD'S PRIMARY WORK

Why is the call to make disciples the very heart of God's work? Why is God pleased when we make a total commitment to discipleship? What does discipleship do that nothing else can?

Let's start with the obvious. Discipleship ranks as God's top priority because Jesus practiced it and commanded us to do it, and his followers continued it.

Jesus Said So

Jesus told us to be disciples and to make disciples. When he issued the Great Commission, he could have spoken about contemplation, study, worship services, or gathering people together for revival meetings in the temple. He could have restated the Great Commandment.² But he didn't. Instead Jesus got straight to the point with simple words: "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” (Matthew 28:18-20). With the Great Commission, transformation became mission.

Jesus’ words reveal his heart and priority. They also indicate a method that will fulfill God’s plan to rescue the world. A commitment to be and make disciples must be the central act of every disciple and every church.

God Gave His All to This Mission

Jesus came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). He came not “to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He held back nothing to reach those he loved. When he claimed, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” in effect he was saying that all the authority of all realms and all time was being marshaled so that, through him, imperfect disciples could go and make other imperfect disciples. The words of William Law come to mind:

Christianity is not a school for the teaching of moral virtue, the polishing of our manners, or forming us to live a life of this world with decency and gentility. It is deeper and more divine in its designs, and much nobler ends. It implies an entire change of life, a dedication of ourselves, our souls, our bodies unto God in the strictest and highest sense of the words.³

Making disciples has nothing to do with winning others over to a philosophy or turning them into nice people who smile a lot. Rather the Great Commission launches a rescue mission; all followers receive orders with full authority to take action wherever they happen to be. Discipleship involves saving people from themselves

and eternal oblivion, permitting the transforming power of God to change them from the inside out. *All* is the Great Commission's key word—*all* authority, *all* sacrifice, *all-out* effort, *all* the time, for *all* people. How could anything else the church thinks up be nearly as important?

A Transformed Person Can Change the World

Jesus addressed this imperative command to his eleven remaining disciples, the first examples of his disciple-making. Many English translations use the word *nations* to describe the target of discipleship. However, the Greek New Testament uses *ethne*, which means “various people groups.”

The focus of reaching others has been universally accepted among orthodox Christians since the beginning. But the ambitious impulse to fulfill the Great Commission sometimes gives it a mechanical or programmatic feel. In particular, the church in America has superseded the theoretical for pragmatism, creating a marketplace model of church and society. This isn't a new phenomenon. Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who toured America in the 1800s and recorded his impressions, said, “Where you expected to find a priest, you found a politician—or a salesperson.”⁴

This marketplace emphasis became deeply rooted in American church culture. Eventually the idea of disciples making other disciples became a church-growth method, a way to increase numbers and satisfy the American thirst for progress. After all, it's a great plan to train eleven people who will go out and reach others. In turn, the reached will reach still others.

As many writers and teachers have proclaimed, when all who become disciples make disciples through several spiritual generations, the result should not be reproduction (adding disciples one at a time) but multiplication (one disciple makes two, who make four, who make sixteen, and so on). I've heard sermons (in fact, I've

preached a few) theorizing that if we just follow this multiplication plan, the entire world will be converted to Christianity in thirty years. That was more than thirty years ago.

In spite of how logical it sounds, this plan runs aground repeatedly on the rocks of human frailty and ignorance of how people really change. We must admit that this mathematical formula has never worked in any broad way. It might have limited success in controlled environments, but it would be wrong to claim that multiplication has worked to the extent of reaching whole cities, countries, or generations.

The principle behind discipleship does involve one person influencing another, which does result in a change in heart and mind. The success of discipleship doesn't depend on soldiering forward in a mechanical strategy of reproduction and multiplication. And discipleship doesn't involve developing a well-trained, elite sales force. Rather discipleship occurs when a transformed person radiates Christ to those around her. It happens when people so deeply experience God's love that they can do nothing other than affect those around them.

The heart of being a disciple involves living in intimate union and daily contact with Christ. Discipleship—the effort both to be a disciple and to make other disciples—is about the immense value of God at work in one individual's life and the resulting impact on other lives.

A Company of the Committed

When someone claims to have faith in Christ, he must also commit to follow Christ. Remember, Jesus taught that faith meant to follow him (see Luke 9:23-25). Anything less is something else—a wish, a desire, or a good intention. But it's not faith, because faith means to follow.

Participation in the Great Commission doesn't require great

learning or ability, but it does require regeneration — being a transformed person. Only the habitation of God in a disciple enables her to answer the call to follow Christ. Two acts of submission flow out of this regeneration:

1. *To be baptized—to go public:* Although baptism remains significant in the present, it lacks the risk and courage it required in the first century. Then the act of baptism proclaimed that someone had indeed decided to follow Jesus. Being baptized in the name of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — meant the follower entered into the reality of experiencing God in his fullness. This separated the believer from all other gods and philosophies.

In the twenty-first-century Global North,⁵ where Christianity is established but shrinking, we don't face the risks that followers of Christ had to take in the first century. In much of the Global South, however, baptism remains a courageous act. Being baptized can put a person on a government watch list, make him an enemy of his people, and even make him a hated member of his own family.

Baptism means going public as a disciple. It was never meant to be a private ritual that takes place inside church walls. For Christianity to flourish, disciples must start out public and remain public. A single disciple creates a light, and the community of disciples shines like a city on a hill. Keeping your light under a cover isn't an option (see Matthew 5:14-16).

2. *To be taught to obey everything Christ commanded—to submit to transformation:* Catholics speak of tradition and Scripture. Anglicans speak of Scripture, tradition, and reason. Protestants speak of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). With these differences clouding church history, can we hope to extract what's most important?

Before Catholics, Anglicans, or Protestants existed, Jesus provided the process to follow: All disciples were to be taught to obey everything he commanded. He commanded 212 things, summed up in three statements:

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF DISCIPLESHIP

1. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.
3. Love your enemies.

Learning to Obey

Although Jesus provided these summaries, when we look at all he commanded we see that the “curriculum” for being and making disciples is extensive, covering all of life. But before we get concerned with *what* we need to obey, we first need to understand *how* to obey. Four ingredients are necessary.

1. *As disciples, we need a vision to inspire us.* Vision provides hope, and hope fuels our efforts as we walk into the future. Just as a great athlete fulfills a childhood dream to win an Olympic medal or play in a professional league, disciples should dream to be like Christ. The apostle Paul had this goal for himself and for all those he loved and trained (see 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 4:19; Colossians 1:28).

Our goal should be to absorb the example of Christ into our lives by studying and meditating on the characteristics of his life. Because the core character trait of Jesus is humility, that’s the place to begin. This vision can pull us into the future, inspiring us for all of life.

2. *As disciples, we need accountability to receive training.* Because training involves constant repetition, it requires discipline. But because consistent self-discipline is rare, we need others to hold us accountable.

Unfortunately, accountability is often couched in the negative, such as when a disappointed person comments, “He failed because he didn’t have anyone to hold him accountable.” However, accountability is a biblical concept—a contemporary term for the ancient principle of helping fellow disciples keep their commitments to God.

Accountability can serve as our best friend, even when we don’t want that friend around. It’s like a chaperone for life—always in

the room with us, but tucked discreetly in the corner. We submit to accountability when we have a passion to please God, to avoid moral failure, or to avoid wasting away the years through neglect and sloth. Accountability means submitting ourselves to at least one other person. That individual has permission to ask any question and keep us honest about life.

3. As disciples, we need structure to empower us. One of the least appreciated necessities in life is structure. Everything from speed limits to the rails on a baby's crib protect us and make life work better.

Just as accountability involves submitting ourselves to other people, structure is about designing life for success. If you want to lose weight, you first need to ask a friend to help you keep your commitment. Then you create a structure that will help you lose weight successfully. This structure might include purging your home of foods that will sabotage your goal, coming up with ways to prepare food at home, and learning how to eat meals in uncontrolled environments. The structure empowers you and makes your goal attainable.

When it comes to developing spiritual habits, a good devotional guide provides structure for me. I meet twice a month with a friend who works and journals his way through the same guide. Our relationship provides accountability and the guide provides the structure. This is just one example of a structure that works. In fact, it doesn't even need to be a great structure. A structure should simply compel us to take action, setting into motion the Holy Spirit's action to reshape us.

4. As disciples, we need relationships where we experience love. Most of us have never experienced the true power of community. The social-oriented programming that many churches call small groups or *koinonia* groups have little affect on character.⁶ True community means living in submission to each another. It requires the work of the Holy Spirit to submit to others and to allow others to play a meaningful part in our growth.⁷

Submission involves trust. Most of us take in only the truth that

we trust. If someone you don't trust tries to convince you to believe something or change your mind, she almost always fails. However, when someone you admire and trust does the same, you'll almost always believe that individual. As disciples, our character develops in a faith community where we feel loved, affirmed, and safe enough to trust other members of the community.

DEFINING TERMS

In trying to understand that discipleship offers God's very best to us, and that he sees it as the primary undertaking of the church, we've already used all of the following words. But let's pause briefly to make sure we have a clear understanding of what each one means.

Disciple

A disciple, *mathetes*, is a learner or follower—usually someone committed to a significant master.⁸ Michael Wilkins, New Testament professor of language and literature at Talbot School of Theology, further describes the term this way:

Disciple is the primary term used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus' followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the way, or saints, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual's relationships with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in Acts.⁹

A disciple, then, is a reborn follower of Jesus. I've already mentioned my distaste for the teaching that a difference exists between

being a Christian and being a disciple. The common teaching is that a Christian is someone who by faith accepts Jesus as Savior, receives eternal life, and is safe and secure in the family of God; a disciple is a more serious Christian active in the practice of the spiritual disciplines and engaged in evangelizing and training others. But I must be blunt: I find no biblical evidence for a separation of Christian from disciple.¹⁰ In answer to the age-old question, “Are disciples born or made?” I contend they are born to be made. The vision Jesus set into motion meant finding and training more people like the Eleven, a lifelong experience where imperfect people would be shaped into his likeness—marked by progress, not perfection.

At the moment of salvation, when someone decides to follow Christ, he shouldn’t experience any interruption on his journey from that point forward. As a new Christian, an individual doesn’t take a “second step” toward becoming a disciple. Instead he embarks on a seamless journey of growth that passes through spiritual childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to maturity. Of course, all disciples experience good seasons and bad ones. All enjoy victories and suffer defeats. All experience stagnant times, and even times when they seem to travel in the wrong direction. But a disciple’s heart consistently yearns for and desires to please God.

When the distinction between disciple and Christian disappears, so does the damaging belief in a two-tiered church. A disciple, then, is the normal Christian who follows Christ. Of course, the way individuals follow Christ will be different. Some followers will be highly educated or literate people who love reading, philosophy, and the ascetic life. Others will be more activist by nature and less contemplative and will find more meaning in serving than in reading or in long seasons of prayer. While people will follow Christ in different ways, no one should think that only the elite practice serious faith and no one should hold the even more destructive idea that being a casual Christian—who decides to believe in Jesus but

not to follow him — is somehow normal.

Discipleship is what a disciple does. If she's not following Christ, then Christ gets left out of the process. This individual has only "signed off" on Jesus and doctrine, but doesn't enjoy a real relationship with Christ. Signing off isn't enough — it's not faith, but merely agreement.

Disciple-Making

The term *disciple-making* comes from the verb *matheteusate*, which means to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

Three dimensions distinguish disciple-making from discipleship:

1. *Deliverance*: The first step in making disciples is evangelism, the part of the Great Commission that tells us to "baptize them." One reason contemporary disciple-making doesn't produce new disciples is because churches limit disciple-making to training people who are already Christians.¹¹ Instead, all disciples should be actively involved in finding others who need Christ and then — through the disciples' gifts, opportunities, and faith community — introducing these individuals to the life of following Jesus.

2. *Development*: Once a disciple makes a commitment to Christ, the next step is developing character and capacity. This comes from the "teaching them to obey" component of the Great Commission (verse 20). Many Christians traditionally refer to this single step as discipleship (or, in more recent times, as spiritual formation).

3. *Deployment*: Once a disciple is trained, the final step is sending. This comes from the "go" (verse 19) aspect of the Great Commission and means deploying the disciple in mission where he lives, works, and plays. The disciple gains an awareness that he lives among lost and broken people and that God's kingdom grows best organically through relationships. Deployment also includes certain "called" individuals who cross cultural and geographic barriers to reach others.

Discipleship

Discipleship, the widely accepted term that describes the ongoing life of the disciple, also describes the broader Christian experience. This word isn't a pure biblical expression, but a derivative. Yet most Christians generally accept discipleship as the process of following Jesus.

Ship added to the end of *disciple* means “the state of” or “contained in.” So discipleship means the state of being a disciple. In fact, the term *discipleship* has a nice ongoing feel—a sense of journey, the idea of *becoming* a disciple rather than having been *made* a disciple.

Spiritual Formation

The term *spiritual formation* is derived from Galatians 4:19: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” The word *formed* comes from *morphe*, which means “to shape.” When combined with Greek prepositions, it is rendered as “conformed” in Romans 8:29 and “transformed” in 12:2.

Most accurately, *spiritual formation* describes the sanctification or transformation of disciples. The term has become popular for those who want to avoid the baggage that *discipleship* has carried in recent years. *Disciple* does seem to dominate the Gospels, while *spiritual formation* describes spirituality in the Epistles.

However, because *discipleship* has stood the test of time and links believers directly to Jesus, I've chosen it to describe the contents of this book.

WHAT DISCIPLESHIP IS NOT

That's a quick look at terms describing discipleship. Yet sometimes people try to make discipleship into other things that end up diminishing it. Unfortunately, that causes leaders to make the

wrong choice their main focus. So it's important to knock down these diluted forms of discipleship before we continue.

Not a Program

The most common mistake made by well-intentioned leaders, particularly acute in the Global North, is turning discipleship into a curriculum that a serious disciple completes and then graduates from. Instead of supporting an ongoing process, a program focuses on finishing the material, learning the information, and developing certain skills such as giving a testimony or using different methods of Bible study.

But because discipleship is fundamentally about the choice to follow Jesus, it needs to be a way of life for all of life. Yes, many good programs provide information and skills, but they're just tools of the growth process, not discipleship itself. When someone says, "I finished the two-year study; I've been discipled," she implies that she doesn't need to continue in the process of discipleship.

Further, program-based discipleship can divide a community of people into those who have been through "the program" and those who haven't. The most damaging result is that churches categorize discipleship as just one of the ministries of the church, rather than the core of the ministry. When discipleship takes a place alongside leadership, evangelism, preaching, worship, counseling, support groups, and other programs, it ceases to be what it was meant to be: the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Not a Production Line

Earlier I mentioned that some people try to turn discipleship into a production plan based on multiplication for reaching the world. Again, this concept is certainly attractive. It's like the challenge most kids have heard from their grandparents: "Would you rather have a million dollars right now or a penny today, two pennies tomorrow, four the next day, and doubled every day for a month?" Almost

every kid answers, “I want the million dollars.” I know I did. But the right answer is to take the penny; in thirty-one days, you’ll have more than ten million dollars!¹²

Of course, no one ever thinks about the practical problems of who’ll deliver the pennies or how many trucks it will take to transport them—not to mention who’ll provide all that money. It’s always the practical problems of real life that ruin the most attractive scenarios.

The truth is that only disciples who are passionate for Christ will be able to sustain any effort to reach others around them. In real life, God doesn’t have a production plan; he uses us to reach others in a wide variety of ways. His glorious method is unpredictable, not smooth or symmetrical. It bursts forward with spasms of energy. It zigzags across the planet in disorganized patterns, propelled by the passion of faithful disciples.

The Great Commission happens as it did with John Wesley, who preached to thousands and placed them in societies and classes for nurture and training. Or in the present day, with Billy Graham as a crusade-preacher, Rick Warren as a pastor-writer, and Michael W. Smith as a singer. God uses some disciples to open entirely new vistas that other faithful disciples, with their own gifts and opportunities, can enter.

In other words, only God orchestrates the call to be and make disciples, and disciple-making can be accomplished only through the events and conditions that make up life. Of course, disciples should certainly be encouraged to train others and to reproduce in others, but discipleship is much more about the depth of character and spiritual passion of each disciple than it is a plan for church growth.

Not Just for Beginners

When I hear people say that discipleship is only for new Christians, I want to pull out the short white hairs left on my head! Yes, new

disciples need basic training, but it's a huge mistake to think that we can simply learn the basics, flow into the general population, and live off that training.

Churches around the world are filled with people who've learned basic information about being a follower of Jesus, but who no longer study the Bible, memorize Scripture, or pray as daily disciplines. This would be like a basketball player who learned the basics of dribbling, passing, shooting, and rebounding, yet no longer practices the basics. You don't know any really good basketball players like that, do you? That's because it's impossible to continue to play at a competent level without continually remastering the basics and staying in good playing condition.

Far too many Christians no longer practice the basics and are out of shape spiritually. The cause of Christ has paid a terrible price because of the mistaken concept that discipleship is only for beginners.

Not Just for Leaders

For much of the history of Christianity, only church leaders—bishops, elders, pastors, priests, monks—received spiritual training. Of course, this changed as a result of the Reformation, as lay people gradually worked their way into training environments. Yet a residual bit of disparity still exists between clergy and laity when it comes to the amount and level of training available.

Some pastors still maintain a spiritual aura that makes average nonprofessionals feel left out. Usually this elitism is unintentional. Many lay people simply feel inferior spiritually to the “real” disciples—those who have chosen full-time church service as a vocation or profession. Sure, pastors know more about religious matters than most lay people, but this doesn't mean they're more spiritual.

Any residual spiritual elitism can be trumped by some basic tenets regarding discipleship:

- *All* Christians are disciples who are born anew to spiritual life when they choose to follow Jesus.
- Both the starting point and the goal of spiritual formation and discipleship is transformation to the image of Christ.
- Together discipleship and spiritual formation provide a full New Testament perspective of the process of the growth of Christians.
- Spiritual formation and discipleship must be biblically and theologically grounded.¹³

Not Just for the Highly Literate

One of the dangers of some discipleship training ministries is that they reward only those who love to read and think bigger and higher thoughts. With the recent blending of ancient mystics and scholars into mainstream evangelical popular literature, everyday people have been introduced to Francois Fenelon, St. Augustine, Lancelot Andrews, Gregory of Nyassa, Benedict of Nursia, and others. These scholars and mystics wrote about topics such as ladders of humility, spiritual labyrinths, and Stations of the Cross. Their literature contains riches, and those who spend hours contemplating it receive great reward. In fact, all Christians can benefit from such experiences, even if only periodically in a retreat format.

However, God also rewards those who read less and instead find most of their spiritual pleasure in service. Certainly the majority of people who served Christ well during much of church history could not read or write. Their spiritual formation occurred by attending daily church services, hearing the words of the liturgy, and taking in the stories of faith depicted in the décor of their churches. In the Middle Ages, for example, spirituality was more communal than individual: people experienced Christ as the community gathered around the reading of the Scripture and the Lord's Table.

God meets people where they are, based on who they are, and using the tools they have available. I'm not encouraging anyone to read less or to spend less time in spiritual contemplation. However, I do want to encourage those who feel less spiritual or less useful because they don't approach their spiritual life from an academic angle.

You should read, but you might grow more through active service. You must pray, but you might pray as you serve on the frontlines. Use the mini-retreats that life offers when others run late or you're stuck in a traffic jam or a backed-up airport. You can be just as intimate with God as someone who studies great spiritual literature. God can use you just as powerfully without spectacular experiences in your private moments.

Not Just for People Who Like Structure

Remember, discipleship isn't a program, although many of us have been taught that it is. Certainly, in an attempt to help groups of people follow Jesus, organizations and publishers have developed various plans or programs. Most of these are good and needed. However, when we strip down discipleship to just completing a curriculum, it becomes much less than God intended.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, one of his disciples, "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Timothy 4:7). Paul wrote this because he knew that people can't be godly—conformed to the image of Christ—without discipline.

Discipline is tough to learn on your own. You're much more likely to learn it with the support of a group and a clear, measurable plan. Eventually you can remove some of the program scaffolding as you internalize the disciplines. Yet the brutal truth is that around 90 percent of people who leave behavioral change programs revert to their former behavior. So we shouldn't be surprised if a similar percentage of people who desire to grow spiritually need the structure and support of that nasty thing called a program. The truth does sting, doesn't it?

Perhaps broadening your understanding of discipleship can help you see that programs serve as an explosive trigger. A program sets you in motion with energy. Even if you're not drawn to structure, it will enrich your life in Christ. You might never feel at home in structure, but when you make peace with it, you'll learn to embrace its value.

THE CREATION OF A NON-DISCIPLESHIP CHRISTIANITY

The church culture in the Global North—along with Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—has largely accepted the idea of non-discipleship Christianity: People can be Christians without making any effort to submit to and follow Christ. The fact that we've developed this two-tier form of Christianity forces us to retrace our theological footsteps back to the actual message we proclaim. We need to ask ourselves, “What kind of person does non-discipleship Christianity produce?”

Does Non-Discipleship Christianity Make Disciples?

What kind of people does this altered gospel message naturally create? Does it create spiritually reborn disciples of Jesus committed to the Great Commission, or does it create consumers of religious goods and services? Unfortunately, the gospel we teach has become drenched in American culture.

This isn't a surprise, and it's not all bad. As Lesslie Newbigin, pastor and former missionary to India, wrote, “No gospel is pure, it is always embodied in a culture.”¹⁴ However, church historian Philip Schaff called America a motley sampler of all church history.¹⁵ The American gospel is predominantly activist rather than contemplative and usually moves toward individualism rather than community.

And our altered gospel message contains several negative characteristics. Let's look at the three most harmful.

The American gospel limits grace to forgiveness of sin. In America in particular, we've crafted the gospel message to produce results. We place the focus of grace on conversion instead of on the whole journey. We measure God's blessing by how many people decide for Christ by coming forward or raising their hand. This emphasis on conversion exerts a tremendous influence on our understanding of grace. While we dole out grace in major doses at conversion, we then watch it trickle for the remainder of a disciple's journey.

Perhaps this is why the words of Ephesians 2:8-9 are quoted regarding God's grace without 2:10. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Verse 10 continues, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." By limiting this awesome passage—even unintentionally—to a lifeboat that rescues us from our plight, we limit the extent of God's grace. Grace, then, is God's continued gift of enabling us to do good works and to give great effort. These are as much a part of his grace as the act of salvation or conversion.

So we must work to restore the grace of God that is active, powerful, and transforming to the way we proclaim the gospel. Grace provides divine enablement for all of life, for the entire journey. We should expect it to flow freely all of our days.

The American gospel separates justification from sanctification. Of course, justification and sanctification do have different meanings: the reality of the new birth and the process of becoming like Jesus, respectively. However, we've incorrectly made the line of demarcation meant to distinguish them into a wall that divides them.

Most of the damage we've done to the gospel with this separation is subtle and without malice. The problem is that separating these

two theological terms gives the impression that being a Christian means obtaining a protected status before God. We've taught that this act of justification settles the issue—"Come in where it's safe and secure"—rather than teaching that a call to believe in Christ should also compel following him. In other words, the point of salvation (justification) isn't the finish line; instead it's the starting line for a lifelong journey (sanctification).

Discipleship flourishes when we present the gospel as a seamless journey of transformation that begins with new life given by God and moves right along with the joy of following Christ every day.

The American gospel teaches that faith equals agreement with a set of religious facts. Believing in Jesus has no meaning if we don't follow him in discipleship. Believing without discipleship isn't believing, it's agreeing to a set of facts about a religious figure.

The problem we face is that we have created and taught a faith that doesn't transform people. Survey the members of your church. Ask if they think discipleship is optional for believers. I bet they'll say yes. However, in Scripture, that kind of Christianity doesn't exist.

Both Jesus and Paul taught that following Jesus is proof of being a Christian.¹⁶ The gospel of the kingdom Jesus delivered in the Sermon on the Mount is the same gospel preached in Acts and the same gospel Paul presented in Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. When Jesus commanded, "Make disciples," he wasn't simply referring to converts. He wants followers who follow—people who submit to his teachings and his ways.

But because we've preached a different gospel, a vast throng of people think they are Christian/saved/born again when they really aren't! We've made the test for salvation doctrinal rather than behavioral, ritualizing it with walking the aisle, praying to receive Christ, or signing a doctrinal statement.

Perhaps we've made it so easy to get into "the life" that we've made it nearly impossible for people to live the life. The life that

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus calls us to—a life of following Him—a life of humility, sacrifice, submission, and obedience.

This has led to what some call bar-code Christians—people who believe the right things but who don't follow Jesus. The real gospel requires us to repent of our sin. To believe means to follow Jesus daily. The gospel requires us to make disciples who learn to obey everything Christ taught. The evidence of salvation is living a life of transformation. I'm not speaking of earning salvation; I'm talking about proof of salvation. Perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is, "Does the gospel we preach produce disciples or does it produce consumers of religious goods and services?"

The most basic issue confronting us is restoring the gospel message of Scripture that will create healthy followers of Jesus. For many, this will require the redefining of the very nature of faith as a faith that follows, a faith that forms the inner person, a faith consistent with the call of Christ to "follow me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

EXPLORING A FAITH THAT EMBRACES DISCIPLESHIP

The statement "exploring a faith that embraces discipleship"¹⁷ implies that a faith exists that doesn't embrace discipleship. We've been talking about that kind of faith, one that results in non-discipleship Christianity. It requires agreement with religious ideas or facts, but doesn't require the development of character to take action. Because that's what much of faith has become, let's briefly explore the faith that requires disciples "to follow" Jesus. In fact, this kind of faith started thousands of years before Jesus ministered and taught on earth.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

The writer of Hebrews wrote about the active pursuit of a faith that embraces discipleship:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

The writer earlier created a list of heroes of the faith from the Old Testament era (see Hebrews 11:4-38): By faith Abel offered a proper sacrifice. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abraham packed up his family and moved. By faith Joseph ran from evil. By faith Moses chose a life of self-denial, confronted Pharaoh, and led the people through the Red Sea. By faith Joshua led the people around Jericho's walls. By faith Gideon showed courage in his obedience even though he was afraid. Samson, David, and Samuel—the world wasn't worthy of them.

These are our great cloud of witnesses; they taught us faith. Notice that with their actions, they showed us what it means to believe. What kind of disciples is the gospel meant to create naturally? The answer is people like these, whose faith embraced following their Lord. Without this kind of faith demonstrated by obedience, can a person really please God (see Hebrews 11:6)?

The lesson here is clear: Faith that doesn't result in action isn't faith, but something less. The apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have

faith but has no deeds? . . . In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14,17).

Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2), taught James about faith. He demonstrated it by obeying in spite of the shame and suffering he faced and endured on the cross.

In fact, Jesus’ own words about faith couldn’t be clearer:

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.” (Luke 6:46-49)

Characteristics of a Faith That Embraces Discipleship

The qualities of the discipleship-based faith taught in Scripture are both basic and important to understanding how to both be and make disciples. Here’s a recap:

- A faith that embraces discipleship is only real when we actively obey it.
- A faith that embraces discipleship is defined historically by people who took action.
- A faith that embraces discipleship distinguishes itself from mere agreement or intellectual assent with demonstrated proof.
- Jesus distinguished a faith that embraces discipleship as thoughtful obedience instead of religious words.

THE KIND OF PERSON THE GOSPEL CAN CREATE

So far, I've declared that you can't be a Christian without being a disciple and that faith as modeled and taught by Jesus requires more than just agreeing to religious truth. It means a commitment to follow Christ daily. Discipleship describes the process of following Jesus; it's the centerpiece of the Christian experience, because as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."¹⁸ The Christian faith and following Jesus are irrevocably linked. You can't have one without the other.

Before we close this section, let's briefly list the characteristics and the competencies that will be found in the kind of person the gospel produces.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DISCIPLES

- A disciple abides in Christ through the Word and prayer (John 15:7).
- A disciple bears much fruit (verse 8).
- A disciple responds to God's love with obedience (verses 9-10).
- A disciple possesses joy (verse 11).
- A disciple loves as Christ loved (verses 12-13).¹⁹

PERSONAL COMPETENCIES OF DISCIPLES

- A disciple submits to a teacher who teaches him or her how to follow Jesus.
- A disciple learns Jesus' words.
- A disciple learns Jesus' way of ministry.
- A disciple imitates Jesus' life and character.
- A disciple finds and teaches other disciples for Jesus.²⁰

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

ON DEFINITIONS OF DISCIPLE

Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus by Michael J. Wilkins (Zondervan, 1992). The best work theologically, done by an outstanding scholar.

The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God by Dallas Willard (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Particularly, check out chapter 8, “On Being a Disciple, or Student of Jesus.”

A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on Spiritual Journey by Brian McLaren (Jossey-Bass, 2001). Defines what it could mean to be a disciple in the present culture. Challenges many of our traditional notions of discipleship, providing in the relationship of the two main characters a beautiful depiction of how one person can affect another.

ON THE PRIORITY OF DISCIPLESHIP

The Master Plan of Evangelism by Robert Coleman (Revell, 2006). The classic of classics on making disciples. Short and accessible, very nicely outlined with good footnotes. Makes the case for discipleship as the first priority for all serious Christians.

The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone, 1995). A not-so-accessible classic in discipleship literature. The first half of the book on “cheap grace” and the Sermon on the Mount is worth the effort. It was written by a very brave and brilliant theologian who lived under the tyranny of the Nazi regime and was executed for his participation in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker by Bill Hull (20th anniv. ed., Baker, 2004). Develops the case from the life of Jesus that he practiced the principles of discipleship that he later called his followers to practice. Also shows how his life makes the case for disciple-making and discipleship as the core of God's work.