

Where has Discipleship gone?

Is there a Crisis in Ecclesiology? By Jay Wegter

On the church deteriorating into default positions: Church structure is a utilitarian mechanism (as in Acts 7 and the provision for a deacon board) and not the core or heart of ecclesiology. That is a truth easily lost. In the book, *The Trellis and the Vine*, author Colin Marshall unfolds the relationship between structure and living church body. The structure, like a trellis, serves as a support role for the vine. It provides some shape and underpinning, but not life and nourishment, therefore the trellis (structure) cannot be the source of our ecclesiology.

And in terms of a default position, what do we commonly see in Evangelicalism? We see hyper-structuralism which has replaced the Great Commission mandate. We see elders stewarding programs rather than stewarding the giftedness of the body and deliberately disciplining its members. Something must change. It is common for pastors to desire something different without doing anything different. What will it cost us to be agents of change so that the default trajectory is reversed so as to recapture the Great Commission mandate?

First we will have to engage in some ruthless honesty; namely that church history gives us a vivid picture of deterioration into the default positions. And here they are:

- 1) Man-centered, not God-centered schemes of sanctification and spirituality.
- 2) Formalism, ritual, and externals not heart religion and Christ-dependent spirituality.
- 3) Passive spectatorship and not a fully ministering laity.
- 4) Feminized spirituality and not a robust patriarchal theologizing.
- 5) The church viewing itself as an institution not an organism.
- 6) A widening gap between clergy and laity (top down, not grass roots diagonal ministry).
- 7) Church services as ‘events’ and not for mutual edification within the body.
- 8) A professional clergy and not a missional community.

Reversing the deterioration of these default positions is hard work. It’s like making water run uphill—in other words, it defies nature. It requires the miracle of the power of the gospel. A certain ‘pull’ must be overcome—the pull of the gravity of what remains of our depravity (the ‘gravity of depravity’ which makes us so ridiculously passive).

Think for a moment of the countless church buildings in Europe. Most were built to last for centuries, as if their purpose and role were timeless. But, the vast majority of them today are but ‘religious grave markers’ indicating where there once was life, but no more.

How did this deterioration of spiritual life become so complete? As faithful ‘coroners’ we need to identify the cause of death. It happened in small increments. It began when religious forms slowly ‘ate up’ NT church function and mission. And as the source of the church’s life (Christ in the gospel) was gradually forgotten, the church institution became a value in itself; it became objectified. The un-objectifiable became objectified—(something

that Paul Zahl said cannot actually be done).

And as the church increasingly rested upon being a value in itself, it mistakenly thought that it had life in itself. Christ, the Lord of His church, became merely the greatest of the saints, and not the Lord of Glory. As His Lordship became more invisible, hidden by the prominence of the externals of religion, the church did not repent, but hardened its practices into forms which became associated with its definition of ‘orthodoxy’. Tragically she imagined that her life was sustained by her religious practices.

Like the church of Sardis of old, she didn’t know that she was dead (Rev 3:1). She conducted herself oblivious to the fact that if she were to have life, it would only be by daily abiding in the life of Christ, her Head. As a result, silently, invisibly *Ichabod* was written over her door. Nonetheless, yet grace-less, Christ-less souls continued the rituals and externals of religion. “. . . and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God” (Col 2:19). Keeping the church going was their assumed goal. But sadly, what was once a lampstand lit by the oil of Christ’s Spirit had become a spiritually lifeless organization of man. Such will be the fate of any church that is content to live upon anything but Christ and His glory. For ministers so easily forget that the gospel creates the church. Like a Texas tornado, the gospel touches down bringing forgiveness, love, freedom and true community. Thus the gospel births the church and sustains her life. The gospel feeds and nourishes the vitality of the church. No wonder we need to be disciplined in the gospel—for it displays to us that Christ is our very Life! There is no spiritual pulse without conscious dependence on Him. Pastors wake up! Are you animated by Christ’s love? Are you exercised over the fact that you will give an account of whether or not you have nurtured a church that was pleasing to Christ? Do you pant after Him to make Him known and to know Him? Do you preach Christ or merely preach about Him?

His eyes are a flame of fire; He is evaluating you now (Rev 1:14-20). If you are not exercised over these things so that you are driven to your knees to plead with your Lord, and if you hesitate in answering the above, then here is what you are facing. It is very likely that you may be leading a church which exists merely to perpetuate itself. That is not Christ’s mandate and pattern. Christ requires us to be utterly devoted to the privileged task of presenting every man complete in Christ (Col 1:28-29). Anything less than that as your ministerial goal is to be something other than Christ’s bondservant.

We wholeheartedly agree that devotion to Scripture in our daily lives and church ministries is central to our spiritual wellbeing. But we need to further in our obedience to Christ and devote ourselves to the progressive sanctification of our church members. And that is a more personal one-on-one relationship with each church member that we shepherd.

I think this is where we have neglected the very emphasis that the apostle Paul had in ministry. Along with his public teaching to the masses, he also ministered in an in depth way to individuals. “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears” (Acts 20:31). “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to

both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21) (teaching and preaching and declaring—in synagogues, marketplaces, and to individuals in their homes).

This biblical emphasis needs to be recovered in our seminaries. We ought to note from Scripture every time Paul mentions or exhibits this one-on-one aspect of ministry. Pastors need to spend time personally imparting spiritual principles for spiritual growth to the men of the church: leadership principles for leadership and doctrinal clarification for maturity and character development in righteousness. These discipleship relationships are the very bridge by which we conduct the vehicles of instruction and doctrine into the personal lives of those we are to influence.

Public proclamation in preaching exposes our people to the truth of the Word—and in that preaching there is exhortation to renew the mind and experience transformation by the Spirit (conforming our lives to the will of God in His infallible Word). Discipleship goes further—we uncover blockages to sanctification. We as disciplers help others renew not only their minds, but also their affections, emotions, and their resolve to love Christ in wholehearted devotion and loyalty. These spiritual partnerships which characterize discipleship fortify and complement the application of the truth of the Word from the pulpit.

In so doing, discipleship further ‘rivets’ God’s truth to the soul. Deep impacting ministry takes place in the context life on life soul care in which we have the opportunity to reach into the deep recesses of men’s hearts and convey sound doctrine with love, encouragement and exhortation. The result will be men whose maturity is progressing on schedule—men whose hearts are captive to the Word of God and men who are enthusiastic and valuable servants in the cause of Christ. Disciple-making is the missing link that is necessary in making a man useful and complete for the work of Christ in our churches (Randy Bossom).

The N.T. Priority of Discipleship – a Diagnostic

- 1.) Pastors, are you satisfied with the current level of discipleship in your church?
- 2.) Do you regard discipleship as absolutely necessary to bring church members to maturity? (Do you agree that the choice not to disciple is a choice for spiritual immaturity?).
- 3.) What kinds of problems occur in churches that falter at discipleship? (sp. weakness, etc.)
- 4.) What is the long-term cost of spiritual weakness due to a lack of discipleship?
 - The life of the body suffers
 - The spiritual safety of the body suffers
 - Assimilation of new members into the body suffers
 - The usefulness of the body suffers
 - The ability of the church to please Christ suffers
- 5.) Do you see a disconnect between your church’s stated philosophy of ministry and the present lack of discipleship?

6.) Should the precise specifics (the “how to,” intentionality) of discipleship be spelled out more fully in our philosophy of ministry?

7.) How would true discipleship do more to augment the full assimilation of new members?

9.) If your church continues to push discipleship into the future, what consequences will it face?

- The maturity of the members will suffer
- Leadership development will suffer
- Personal holiness will suffer
- The ability to shepherd newcomers will suffer
- True evangelism will suffer

10.) Do you see a connection between the present rate of turnover of visitors and members and the lack of discipleship?

The longer a church postpones discipleship, the greater the temptation will be to shape church programs by market forces and financial considerations. The N.T. defines the church’s function around The Great Commission. The church is the ‘Pillar and support of the truth . . .’ (1 Tim 3:15). The church is to labor diligently to bring each of its members to maturity (Col 1:28-29).

Where has discipleship gone? For too long our church has offered a mélange of Christian activities and ministry options without genuine intentionality in the area of discipleship. There are a host of advantages of “mainstreaming” the discipleship vision from the pulpit and from every church leader. First of all, it provides a consolidation of our purpose and it ties us much closer to our biblical philosophy of ministry.

The shepherds/staff/pastors are stewards of the biblical vision for discipleship. “Mainstreaming” and modeling the vision of discipleship plants a much needed optimism in the person in the pew that they can be (and should be) involved in life on life soul care.

Church leaders must lean forward—so as to move outside of their comfort zones if discipleship is to be mainstreamed. Church ministries tend to organize themselves in a “territorial” manner. Leaders settle into the mindset that they are controlling a particular ministry. But a willingness to give away one’s ministry is often the very element needed to give full freedom to the Spirit of God to work His way among the members.

Church leaders free from territorial possessiveness will encourage and support ministry when he sees it taking place—even when it is not occurring through a program. As stewards of the discipleship vision, church leaders must complete their part in the ministry “chain reaction” by seeking to unleash the mutual edification of the body.

The discipleship vision needs to be reiterated because it easily slips from view. The members must be equipped and unleashed to bring the body to maturity. As stewards the church leaders must see church programs as only an attempt to set conditions for ministry.

The Holy Spirit is the true Administrator of ministry (Jn 15:5). He is sovereign in ministry and over ministry (1 Cor 12:12-26). He administers the New Covenant; we don't. Pastors led by the Spirit will fully embrace Christ's pattern for His church (Eph 4:9-16). That means they should always be working to equip and unleash the giftedness of the body. This is precisely where a breakdown occurs most often.

Church leaders deeply underestimate what the Spirit intends to do through lay people. And the consequence of that miscalculation is that pastors slide back into our default position—as if the Spirit is dependent upon our leadership, programs and teaching (and as if ministry stops with its reception by the layman, the “end user.”

In order to break out of this all too common pattern, church leaders must see their role as working to complete the loop so to speak. In other words, the “loop” of discipleship ministry scribes the following circle: leaders equip members to do the work of ministry. Members edify the body and take responsibility to bring one another to maturity. Lay leaders grow into church leaders.

It is easy to see where this breaks down. Church leaders teach; but most commonly NOT with a view (or with the expressed purpose) to work themselves out of a job by training the members to do the lion's share of ministry. Church leaders haven't done their job until they labor to see the loop closed—to see those under their equipping released to ministry, and to see those released to ministry equipping others and releasing them to ministry (2 Tim 2:2).

Creating the Environment Discipleship (Soma Communities training resources)

In Christ's pattern we watch Jesus make disciples, turning fishermen into fishers of men. Then before He ascends back to His Father, He gives them the mission to also make disciples who obey His commands. And in the book of Acts we see how they accomplished that mission.

Discipleship wasn't merely a Sunday school class to attend, or curriculum to be discussed, or a selection of programs to choose from. Those structures may teach what Jesus commanded, but they don't create the environment for teaching people to obey what Jesus commanded. That requires the context of a gospel-centered close relationships (or community) of spiritual partnerships) which exist to grow a fully formed disciple capable of making another disciple (we have all felt our helplessness at times in attempting to make that happen).

It is a fact, we as church leaders can no more force our people to grow disciples than a farmer can make a plant grow. “So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth” (1 Cor 3:7). But, much like a farmer, we can help create an environment that supports growth (as in 1 Corinthians 3).

DISCIPLESHIP: Is the holistic spiritual care of a small group of people who are consistently experiencing Jesus's life and teaching together in a healthy discipling environment where they are learning to submit every area of life to the Lordship of Christ (Soma Community of Churches).

Qualities of a healthy discipling environment (a discipleship-based church):

1.) A conscious dependency upon the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15-20; 16:7-15; Rom 8:5-14; Gal 5:16-26). Only the Holy Spirit can transform lives. He teaches, reminds, convicts, helps, leads, and counsels. He exerts His influence to make us like Jesus. He empowers us to accomplish the works we have been created to do (Eph 2:10). We can do nothing apart from Him (Jn 15:5).

2.) An emphasis upon gospel-saturation (unto *gospel fluency*) (Rom 8:28-29; Gal 2:14; Mt 15:1-20; 20:20-28; Acts 20:32). The gospel must permeate our disciple-making efforts. For the gospel is the answer to every problem and the motivation to submit every area of life to the lordship of Christ (the gospel itself is the motivation to apply the gospel to every area of life). As we are amazed by God, His wisdom, power, glory, goodness, and grace revealed to us in the gospel, we find our security, significance, approval, joy and satisfaction in Him rather than in anything else (Ibid.).

3.) A controlling ethos of service to others (Mt 8:1-3, 14-17; 10:5-8; Lu 9:10-17; 18:35-43; Jn 12:26). Jesus placed a high value on service and evangelism to those who were not yet His followers, especially to those who were in great need. Jesus was consistently exposing the disciples to different kinds of people in different places, and with different needs.

The character qualities of love, compassion, servanthood, sacrifice, and generosity are more likely to be integrated into a person's life as he enters into the context of ministering to those who are desperately needy. It is essential that this is practiced frequently, rather than once or twice a year—there is no other way for this to become part of a person's lifestyle (Ibid.).

4.) A holistic approach to spiritual mentoring (Mt 5:1-12; 6:1-4; 6:19-34; Lu 5:5-11; 6:37-42). It is obvious from the teaching and experiences Jesus had with the disciples that He was committed to developing them holistically. In other words, He was concerned about bringing their whole lives under the will of the Father (and offering their whole lives as worship to God).

Discipleship needs to involve caring for the whole life of the person. Every area of a person's life needs the gospel—not just “spiritual” areas like Bible study, prayer, etc. A person's time, job, recreation, money, body, relationships, etc. must all be shaped from a gospel perspective.

5.) A frequent and long-term commitment (Mt 4:18-23; 9:35-38; Lu 8:1, 22). It took Jesus three years of investment in the disciples before they were ready to minister and lead on their own. During those three years, they spent an incredible number of hours together. Discipleship is not fast; it takes lots of time, commitment, and sacrifice. A discipler must be with his or her disciples frequently and must care for them over the long term.

6.) A life of true discipleship ‘modeled’ (Mt 8, 9, 14:13-21; Lu 5:12-13; 8:25-56; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). Though at times Jesus taught His disciples in formal settings, it was His consistent example of love, servanthood, boldness, generosity, encouragement, worship, and

truth that had the greatest impact on the lives of the disciples.

Disciples need to see what is expected of them lived out in the day to day example of their discipler. If a person cannot see up close a model of what they should be doing, it will be difficult to do it well or consistently.

Along with Christ's example our Lord utilized an experiential learning environment. They traveled, ate, and ministered together. Very little of their time was spent in a formal learning environment. Our disciples need to learn how to help people experience life lived in line with the gospel (Gal 2:4). We need to live closely with our disciples outside of church gatherings—so that we are actually engaging in life, relationships, and ministry together.

7.) An approach that is individually tailored (Mt 14:28-31; 16:15-19; 26:36-38; Lu 9:28; 22:31-34). Though we see Jesus spending a great deal of time with the disciples as a group, we also see Him speaking specifically into the lives of individual disciples at different times and in different ways. In addition to the group dynamic, discipleship must have a personal nature as well, because each person in a group has different needs, problems, passions, and spiritual gifts. Each person must be viewed individually. This is how parents view the development of each of their children. We need the leading of the Holy Spirit to identify needs and see effective ways of addressing those needs.

8.) An expectation of multiplication (Mt 4:10, 19; 28:19-20; Lu 10:1-3, 17-20). It was Jesus' strategy from the beginning that His disciples would be the foundation of the church and the foundation for the multiplication of followers of Jesus around the world.

As disciples teach others to obey all of Jesus' commands, that includes His command to make disciples. Part of being a disciple of Jesus is making disciples of Jesus. This goal of multiplication, with the "disciplee" becoming discipler, should be stated and expected from the beginning. Though every person is not a gifted leader, every person is spiritually gifted and called to be a discipler as part of some form of gospel-centered community on mission.