

What killed discipleship in American Evangelicalism?

By Jay Wegter

What factors have contributed to the radical marginalization of the Great Commission mandate of our Lord—"make disciples?" First of all, the N.T. gives us a powerful historical account of a local church that degraded into sectarianism, cliques, an overly hierarchal order (a pecking order if you will of over/under), and sensuality.ⁱ The Corinthian correspondence is an intense corrective to a lapsing ecclesiology. Paul runs the solution to every problem in Corinth through the cross of Christ. The Apostle's diagnosis of the Corinthian catastrophe points to a core problem: the Corinthian believers were establishing their policies and ministry endeavors based upon the world's wisdom instead of God's infinite transformative wisdom in the cross of Christ.

The Corinthian church preferred the World's Wisdom, not the Cross.

In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul establishes that the two kinds of wisdom are mutually exclusive—the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the cross. All that God is doing in and through His church is through Christ and Him crucified. Thus, God's wisdom in the cross is the only wisdom worth building upon (1 Cor 1-2). In gravitating to pragmatism, much of Protestantism has forgotten this dichotomy between the world's wisdom and the wisdom of the cross. This has directly contributed to the death of disciple-making. And, as a consequence of imbibing the world's wisdom, radical identification with Christ and His cross has been replaced with the hubris of *triumphalism*. A theology of human glory, *triumphalism* focuses on what man can build. *Triumphalism* has displaced the theology of the cross.

Evangelicals appear to be no longer interested in the theology of the cross—in becoming weak that we might become strong (2 Cor 12:9-10). It just doesn't fit our Western paradigm. In the *triumphalism's* theology of glory, man constructs things for God, thus the 'efficiency' of pragmatism reigns supreme. We're offering God our ministry and worship, but we're not making disciples. That is why in so much of Evangelicalism today we see ecclesiastical engineering, entrepreneurship, and the harnessing of market forces—all at work to gain numerical growth as the 'most reliable' index of genuine ministry success. In the church in Corinth, the world's wisdom was eclipsing the wisdom of the cross. So also, in the church today there is an attempt to do

God's work in man's way, instead of making disciples which is doing God's work in God's way.

Worldly wisdom allows the ends to justify the means; but that is crass pragmatism. No wonder the world's wisdom is not offended by an ecclesiology that allows the lowest common denominator to set the bar low—just as long as there are numbers. Thus, we should not be surprised at the radical reductionism in the state of the church today. By reductionist is meant a spiritual passivism which characterizes today's congregations. When that spectator mindset is prevalent, the church becomes a spiritual Walmart, an 'audience' designed for consumers. You get churches a mile wide and one inch deep. Regarding that shallowness, Bible teacher Shane Haffey observes,

In event-based churches lacking discipleship there is little visible reason for congregants to develop a serviceable theology. Attendees see no real need to spend their time wrestling with a text of Scripture during the week. For pragmatic church structure infers that our Lord's mandate for discipleship is covered and the most capable ministers have already been selected. What is left for the untrained lay person to contribute? Hence, congregants feel inadequate, unconfident, and have little incentive to develop their own biblical convictions.ⁱⁱ

The N.T. Function of the Church hinges upon her Use of Spiritual Gifts.

How did we reach this point in which we are comfortable with churches occupied by non-ministering 'passengers' content to be warehoused? J. I. Packer's incisive comments certainly apply: "In the N.T. every member is a limb [or branch] that exists for the good of the whole [what a contrast from an over-centralized church pattern]. Most congregations contain passengers. [And as result of] institutional rigidity, churches are inhibited from impacting local communities."ⁱⁱⁱ How can we seek the recovery of an 'every member' ministry? How can we return to the power of primitive Christianity in which authentic church life was exercised?

Packer appeals to Puritans such as John Owen for the answer—arguing that an 'every member ministry' or, a 'fully ministering laity' is the result of individual believers being utterly serious about 'stewarding' their spiritual gifts. "As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is *to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is *to do so* as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to

whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:10-11).

Puritan John Owen warns, “[Church] ministry devoid of [the exercise of] spiritual gifts is sufficient evidence of a church degenerating into apostasy.”^{iv} Thus, when church growth principles crowd out the centrality of Christ’s last commandment, *make disciples*, you will not have a ministering laity with the gifts being practiced—the church becomes a mere shadow of itself.^v

When the Great Commission ceases to be the church’s priority, other metrics or indices will become the means of measuring its effectiveness. When that happens, church forms will inevitably replace the N.T. functions of the church.^{vi} Pastor Mike Breen of England summarizes the whole issue in a single cogent statement: “If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples.”^{vii} Is that an oversimplification—can it really be that simple of an assessment? If we examine the current situation by the words of our Savior (Mt 28:18-20), I believe that the answer is ‘Yes, it is that basic, that fundamental’.

Biblical Discipleship is Theology personally applied through Soul Care.

Another significant factor which has contributed to the near death of discipleship in America is the marginalization of Bible doctrine. Out of all the religious expressions in the world, only Christianity has a true ethical system based upon theology—which is the revealed character of God. Therefore, we must teach, preach, and model the impact of theology on ethics—that is our job. Theology systematically unpacks the reality that we are made in God’s image to be the likeness of God. This is only possible through the grace that is in Christ Jesus.^{viii} The image of God is our creational identity and our *new creation identity* (2 Cor 5:17)—thus our ‘job description’ is to be or live as the image of God as new men and women created in Christ Jesus (Col 3:9-11).

Theologian, David Wells gives a scathing rebuke to ministers/churches that ignore theology: “Evangelicalism exists as an informal religious establishment that derives its power from culture, not theology! In the last 30 years, there has been an almost complete decline of confessional interest.”^{ix} We can easily see how this has had a negative impact on discipleship—if one ignores theology, everything quickly reverts to being man-centered. Only theology has the power to restore us to being theocentric. Wells continues in his reproof:

Today’s Evangelicals practice a religion wed to worldliness. Results are measured by “successful” entrepreneurship. Biblical truth is dislocated from life.

Discernment is gone. The Church's theological soul is dying as a result. The Church is no longer taking its bearings from God who is centrally holy. Evangelicalism, having abandoned theology, is running on the high octane fuel of modernity, therefore it cannot see the alien values inside it! In this condition, the Church cannot recognize or dislodge worldliness.^x

Evangelicalism's new 'attraction model' value system is '*remove the barriers to conversion, and you'll get the numbers*'. [Church growth guru] McGavran's formula for church growth is *applied sociology*. [In that arrangement] raw pragmatism intrudes into churches where the confessional and the theological have faded. When theology is not at the center, managers and marketers will conduct the "business" of the Church.^{xi}

Ouch! David Wells isn't sparing Evangelicalism here—this is 'tough love'.

And for good reason—in biblical discipleship, there is systematic training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17). It is through biblical discipleship—training in doctrine—that our disciples learn to live righteously unto God, that is to live 'God-ward' lives (1 Tim 6:3). Wells warns that without theology in a central position in the church, the gravity and weightiness of God's majesty are quickly lost:

There must be an echo of holiness in those who approach God. That echo manifests itself in separation and consecration unto God. God's holiness is intrusive to the inner man. To approach God's holiness is to have the life of the inner man invaded by light that exposes everything. If holiness slips from a central position, then the centrality of Christ is lost. One cannot enter the knowledge of the Holy as a consumer, ONLY as a sinner. Sin, grace, and faith are emptied of meaning apart from the holiness of God. The implications of God's holiness are missing in the Church. God's authority and power are passé. Self is sovereign; authority now is only a private reference.^{xii}

Growth in the Knowledge of the Holy One depends upon Theology.

Those who are not interested in theology are not interested in God's holiness. And those not interested in holiness will not care much about receiving holiness from the Lord. And those not interested in receiving holiness from the Lord will obviously treat discipleship in righteousness as purely optional. Churches without an emphasis upon theology will find other ways to define God's relation to man. God will be there to fix us—to improve our lives and assist us in our personal journey—we will all be in

process together. Does any of that sound familiar? When theology is marginalized, psychology rushes into the vacuum morphing ministry into therapy.

Modernity is pouring into the vacuum left by an anti-theological mood. The result is a faith unlike historic orthodoxy, [a faith] that no longer defines itself theologically.^{xiii}

Biblical interest manifested by reading and diligent study is replaced by a search for happiness; holiness is replaced by a search for wholeness; truth is replaced by feelings; and ethics by feeling good about oneself. The past recedes; the church recedes; all that remains is self. Psychologizing of faith is destroying the Christian mind. Theology was written for the Church; when people are no longer compelled by God's truth, they can be compelled by anything.^{xiv} Unless the church can recover the knowledge of what it means to live before a holy God . . . [in] humility, wonder, love, and praise—unless it can find again a moral purpose in the world that resonates with the holiness of God, theology will have no place in its life.^{xv}

With the abandonment of theology comes a lack of motivation to study to show oneself approved unto God (2 Tim 2:15). Closely associated with that mindset is an attitude which says, "I am content with second hand convictions. I attend a good church, that is enough." What is lacking is the heart commitment expressed as, "I can't live without the Word of God, I have to know what it means, I have to know its Author, His love for me, and His will for me. I am not obedient unless I am devoted to the Word of God in order to be conformed to the will of God." Nothing less than this attitude can provide the fertile soil of first-hand convictions.

Develop First-hand Convictions; the Heart of biblical Transformation.

Discipleship is 'spiritual parenting' for the purpose of helping fellow believers develop 'first hand' convictions. We live in an age of 'screen culture' social media, podcasts, and endless apps'—immediacy characterizes the way we locate and assimilate information. But, the process of growing in our knowledge of God cannot be successfully conformed to a five-minute Google search and download. Living for Christ cannot successfully be adapted to search and download. Nonetheless, the temptation in an instant society of sound-bites is to live vicariously through our celebrity pastor leaders. Consequently, church culture pulls in the direction of an informed, but passive spectatorship.

There has been a miscarriage in passing on the faith, once for all delivered to the saints. Generational replacement (Ps 78:5-8) has come woefully short because of lack of vision. We have raised up at least two generations of professed believers who for the most part, are ‘hearers of the Word,’ but not ‘doers of the Word’. How did this happen? In part, a century of psychology has left Americans fully buying into the ego-stroking myth that the foundation for social relations is: “I’m OK, you’re OK.” But God says the opposite and He requires us to admonish, exhort, discipline, encourage, and instruct one another (Rom 15:14; 1 Thess 2:7-12).

Associated with this problem of being merely hearers who deceive themselves (Jas 1:22-24) is the fact that few professing believers actually meditate upon Scripture so that the truth of God is presented to the mind’s eye and then to the religious affections. Consequently, we have churches populated by people with second-hand convictions—professing believers who have contented themselves with merely a *God concept* instead of a passionate growing intimate first-hand knowledge of the Lord (Grk. *epiginosko*—to understand fully, to know thoroughly) (2 Pet 3:18). A leading biblical counselor at the church where this author has served gave a powerful assessment of the spiritual ravages caused by a ‘casual’ relationship with the Word of God—i.e. the absence of first-hand convictions.

Our case load in biblical counseling has expanded to a year and one half. There are virtually no openings for 18 months. In nearly every case, the same issue comes up in the counseling room. The counselee comes to us with a debilitating problem. Having faced a difficult life trial, or ‘emotional hand grenade’ the individual responded with an ill-advised emotional, fleshly decision which is now costing them dearly. And in each of these situations, the counselee had not devoted him or herself to the mastery of Scripture so as to develop first-hand convictions. As a consequence, they had not stored up a compendium of biblical wisdom from which they could draw in times of temptation and testing. They literally had not constructed any device whereby they could access or retrieve biblical wisdom. And now they sit in the office wanting solutions—craving relief from the pain of their problems.

Those who merely audit the Truth lack genuine Wisdom.

These suffering counselees had not turned knowledge into wisdom by means of obedience. Is it any wonder our Lord put such a premium on ‘teaching them to obey’? To live without first-hand biblical convictions is indeed costly. This present

author saw a striking illustration in our neighborhood which reminded me of the dangerous complacency surrounding second-hand convictions. A windstorm had swept our community and numerous trees were completely uprooted and laying on their sides. What had been hidden from view, the root systems, were now above ground and laid bare to the eyes of all. The trees that had been toppled were not to be re-planted, they were destined for the chain saw and the wood chipper. It was a sad sight—the well-shaped boughs of leaves still green and attractive; but, having fallen over, had lost their connection with the earth’s soil and water—death was imminent.

Now here is the lesson: the carefully landscaped trees which had blown over revealed shallow root systems. Their carpet of roots was only inches deep, they had been living off of their daily ration of sprinkler water. They had no apparent need or motivation to send their tap roots deep to find their own liquid nourishment. Therefore, when the windstorm hit, there was no adequate support to help them weather the gale. They blew over far too easily, never to grow again.

What a vivid picture of second-hand convictions. Like trees planted in a park-like environment depending on timed sprinkler water, many church goers sit complacently under the pulpit each week, but never learn to meditate on the Word so as to develop first hand convictions. They have never learned to send their roots deep—to seriously feed themselves and gather their own ‘manna’ from the Word (Ps 1:1-3; Jer 17:7-8). Therefore, they will be remarkably vulnerable when the storms of life come.

Faith and Obedience are inseparable; you always *do* what you *believe*.

To mentor believers through discipleship is to insist that faith and obedience are inseparable. A conviction does not become first-hand until the disciple makes the sacrifice necessary to consistently obey the biblical commands associated with that conviction. That is the process of knowledge becoming wisdom. We ask our disciples, “Do you understand that faith and obedience are inseparable?” As we study a Scripture text together, we imbue the following upon our disciple: “What would your life look like if you fully obeyed the command in this text?” As disciple-makers we will be ministering to individuals ensconced in church culture—they have been used to being but a passive audience. Your disciples will learn from you that first-hand convictions are inseparable from obedience.

True discipleship is not simply going through a particular curriculum, it is speaking your first-hand, hard-won convictions into the lives of others as you model

obedience to the Word of Christ. “With an obedience-centered discipleship program, the emphasis is on how we can be obedient to Christ in every area of our lives and in every circumstance, regardless of the consequences.”^{xvi} Your disciple needs to see and to hear your first-hand convictions ‘first hand’ from you—in an up-close relational space with you. This is an indispensable part of training in biblical discipleship. Spiritual passion is *caught more than taught* (1 Thess 2:3-10).

The loss of the centrality of the gospel as the core of theology is always through the blight of settling for second-hand convictions. It has been said that the first generation preaches the gospel, the second generation assumes the gospel by second hand convictions, and the third generation denies the gospel. Colin Marshall notes that first-hand convictions start when theology becomes connected with deep reading of the Bible. By meditating on Scripture and connecting deep reading of the Bible with doctrine, our passion for Christ will naturally be increased.

It is not possible to hold these passionate first-hand convictions in the abstract—they will translate into Christian character in our relationships and the fruit of the Spirit. Out of convictions flows character and fruit-bearing. These three: *conviction, character, and competency* will be the focus of the leaders engaged in training disciples and disciple-makers. Leaders will always be working on these three in the lives of those they are training.^{xvii}

Church Members must see Discipleship up close to know what it is.

The vision for disciple-making must come through the leadership of the church. Disciples are to be educated and trained to build, serve, and lead. That is the plan of Jesus, make a disciple, and he will do mission each day as he comes and goes. This won’t be exceptional, but normative. Make disciples and you’ll get both the church and you’ll get consistent missional waves.^{xviii} So how did this become dumbed down to the point that all we require is ‘just showing up’? Part of the problem is that the church has replaced N.T. functions with cultural forms. And one of the most common forms is the ‘small group’. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with cell groups, home fellowships, etc. but, they are not to be equated with disciple-making.

If a disciple is made in a small group, I am afraid that is far more coincidental than it is deliberate and intentional. Here is the reason why, small groups are far better at inviting and making people feel comfortable than they are at challenging and providing high accountability. In a word, they are built for comfort not for challenge.

They generally do not have a mechanism to see if obedience to the Scriptures is taking place. Therefore, in order to truly grow a culture of disciple-making, you must come to terms with the fact that there are no accidental disciples. Disciples result from intentional pursuit. In the American church there is a tendency to be honored, to be pursued; but to be extremely hesitant to pursue the other for the purpose of his spiritual wellbeing. It takes deliberate intentional discipleship in order for believers to insert themselves sacrificially in the lives of others so as to minister and edify their brethren—including ministering to broken brethren.^{xix}

A disciple-making culture is not created by accident, nor by gathering to meet social needs. Church leaders won't break out of the self-deceptive malaise that small groups grow disciples until there is a willingness to see disciple-making as a 'must win battle'. The entire church, starting with the leaders, must break out of the 'client-provider mindset'. This paradigm shift is absolutely essential in order to create an empowered discipleship culture. Prepare for some failure—brace yourselves for an extended learning curve—you will be learning discipleship over the long haul.^{xx}

Building a culture of discipleship is the only way to produce the community that Jesus and the N.T. recognizes as the church. [That is] a dynamic living organization, an authentic [deep] community full of the life of God with hearts open to the Lord and to one another and to the world in need.^{xxi}

J. A. James wrote the following in 1847. It illustrates the problem of passive Christianity which lacks the biblical piety that is developed through disciple-making.

Our idea of the nature of earnest individual piety must be taken, not from the conventional customs of the age—but from the Word of God. Once one gives up the Bible as *the only true standard of personal piety*, and there is no rule left but *custom* [and culture], which is ever varying with the opinions and corruptions of the times. Yet how prevalent is the disposition to *conform ourselves to the prevailing religion of the day and of the church to which we belong*, and to satisfy ourselves with the *average measure of piety* around us! “I am as good as my fellow members!” is the *shield* with which many a professor wards off the allegation of his living below his Scriptural duty. This has been *the fatal practical error* of the church through every age of its existence, by which . . . its *beauty* has been disfigured, its *power* weakened, and its *usefulness* impeded! Professing Christians, instead of looking into the *perfect standard of Scripture*, and seeing themselves reflected from that faithful mirror, and adjusting their character and conduct by its infallible revelations—placed before themselves the

standard of the Christian profession as it was found in the church of the day, and regulated their behavior by what they saw in the prevailing character of their fellow Christians!^{xxii}

Thus, a constant *multiplication of corrupted copies* has ever been going on!

And religion, as seen in the conduct of its professors, compared with that which is described in the pages of its own inspired rule—have been quite different things! Let us turn away from the religion we see in the *church*—to the religion we read in the *Bible*! Let us not go to the imperfect and blurred *copy*—but to the perfect and unspotted original! The Bible’s representation of the nature of true piety is intended for us as our guide, and is obligatory upon us! *But the inspired, unalterable, and infallible standard of Scripture* is . . . too spiritual, too devout, too unearthly, too humbling, too self-denying for many professors. This is still the stern, unbending demand of Christ: “If any of you wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me!” [Mt 16:24].

The following excerpts are from *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheap jack’s wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution

without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the Kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected. In the wilderness God gave Israel the manna every day, and they had no need to worry about food and drink. Indeed, if they kept any of the manna over until the next day, it went bad. In the same way, the disciple must receive his portion from God every day. If he stores it up as a permanent possession, he spoils not only the gift, but himself as well, for he sets his heart on accumulated wealth, and makes it a barrier between himself and God. Where our treasure is, there is our trust, our security, our consolation and our God. Hoarding is idolatry [Lu 14:25-35].^{xxiii}

End Notes:

ⁱ See Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* in his brilliant exposition of the Corinthian Catastrophe, showing how the errors in Corith parallel modern abuses in Pentecostalism.

ⁱⁱ Shane Haffey, President and Teaching Fellow, www.gospelforlife.org

ⁱⁱⁱ J. I. Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, p. 221-224

^{iv} John Owen in Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 224

^v Ibid, p. 223

^{vi} J. P. Moreland, *Love your God with all your Mind*

^{vii} Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*

^{viii} Larry Pettegrew, The Master's Seminary, "Why does Theology matter?" p. 8

^{ix} David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p. 26

^x Ibid, pp. 55-56

^{xi} Ibid, pp. 69-71

^{xii} Ibid, pp. 142-148

^{xiii} David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 108-109

^{xiv} Ibid, pp. 182-183

^{xv} Ibid, p. 301

^{xvi} David Watson & Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple-making*, p. 15

^{xvii} Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*

^{xviii} Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*

^{xix} Missionary, Dan Vanderbil to Algerians in South of France documents how in the N. African culture there is a self-less pursuit of others in the interest of brotherhood—a pursuit of one's brother missing in Evangelicalism.

^{xx} Ibid. Mike Breen

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} J. A. James, "Earnestness in Personal Religion" 1847, on the Constant Multiplication of Corrupted Copies

^{xxiii} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*