

7 Reasons We Don't Make Disciples

Five years ago, I had a very scary birthday with a zero in it. I dreaded turning 50 because that number sounded so old! But I chose to accept reality. I also decided I would spend the rest of my life investing in the next generation because I believe discipleship is at the very heart of the gospel.

God began to put young men in my life, and many of them asked me if I would mentor them. I began taking some of them on mission trips. Others began calling me for counsel or coaching. Some needed prayer to overcome habits or addictions. The more I invested in them, the more excited I got about helping other Christians grow in their faith.

Today, mentoring young people is the most fulfilling thing I do. I enjoy preaching to crowds, but if I have to choose between speaking to an audience of a thousand or talking to a small group of spiritually hungry young leaders, I would choose the latter every time. That's because relational discipleship is the lost art of Jesus and the secret of New Testament ministry.

Today I believe the Holy Spirit is drawing the church back to the New Testament model. Leaders as well as churchgoers are weary of the impersonal, performance-based, people-in-the-pews approach. We are tired of the show. We have not been called to entertain an audience—we have been commissioned to train an army.

We all know Jesus spent most of His ministry investing in a small number of followers who then invested in others. So why don't we use that approach? Here are 7 obvious reasons:

1. We are ignorant of the Great Commission. When Jesus was about to leave this earth, He gave us our final marching

orders in Matthew 28:19. He did not say, “Go and attract crowds” or “Go and preach to multitudes” or “Go and build churches.” There is certainly nothing wrong with buildings, good sermons or mass evangelism, but Jesus made it clear that our priority is relational discipleship: “Go and make disciples.” If He spent 3 1/2 years investing in a small handful of followers, why do we think we can do it a different way?

2. We have not been discipled ourselves. Countless pastors have admitted to me that they never had a mentor. Bible colleges and seminaries teach theology and methodology, but ministers of God cannot be mass-produced on an assembly line. God’s servants are hand-made. Doctors in this country must go through an internship program, but rarely do Christian leaders receive hands-on training from caring mentors. Paul told the Corinthians, “I became your father through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15, NASB), but this concept is foreign today because the fatherlessness of our culture is also in the church.

3. We prefer programs over relationships. When Jesus called His disciples, He appointed them “*so that they would be with Him* and that He could send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14, emphasis added). Jesus’ first desire was for a relationship; the work of the ministry was secondary. Today we have switched this—our focus is on the work, and the importance of relationships is minimized. One pastor recently told me that in his denomination, ministry has been reduced to what he called “the ABCs of Attendance, Buildings and Cash.” When ministry becomes a business, you know you have abandoned true discipleship.

4. We are impressed with size. The descendants of Noah built the Tower of Babel because they wanted to make a monument to themselves. This has always been the tendency of carnal men. We love big. We love the spotlight. But God came down and

confused the builders of Babel (see Genesis 11) because He wanted them to build *out*, not *up*. We prefer addition when God desires multiplication!

Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators organization, was committed to the concept of discipleship because he knew if he could invest in a small group of Christians until they reached maturity, they would then invest in others, and then the chain reaction would create a multiplication effect. If four people discipled four other people over a six-month period, Trotman said, and those people discipled four more people in six months, this would result in 1,024 disciples after five years. And after 16 years, there would be more than 2 billion disciples! If we did it God's way, we could reach the world!

5. We lack patience for the process. There is nothing glamorous or sensational about discipleship. Spending three years leading a small group seems unimpressive. This is exactly what Jesus did—yet one of His closest disciples, Peter, ended up denying Him. After Peter was restored, he preached the inaugural sermon on the Day of Pentecost and laid the foundation of the New Testament church. You may get frustrated because some of your disciples grow at a snail's pace. But you never know the impact your disciples will make in the end.

6. Our personal brokenness prevents us from healing others. The process of discipleship includes the healing of our souls from past wounds. We cannot be mature in Christ if we are still bound by sinful habits. Yet many Christians today are stuck in spiritual infancy because they have not gone through the necessary process of healing so they can walk in holiness. You will never bring others to spiritual maturity if you have not learned to overcome your brokenness.

7. We want churchgoers to stay immature. When children grow up, they leave their homes, get married and have their own families. This has been God's plan since He told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Jesus repeated this commission to His disciples when He said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8). Real disciples make disciples. They don't just sit in pews year after year like spectators.

Some insecure pastors don't want members of their congregations to grow because they feel threatened by mature believers. They are afraid someone will steal their ministry. That's crazy! I want my spiritual sons and daughters to surpass me in spiritual fruitfulness. Let's swallow our pride and get back to the primacy of discipleship.

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