



THE DISCIPLE- MAKING PASTOR

LEADING OTHERS ON THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

BILL HULL

REVISED AND EXPANDED

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Contents

Foreword by Robert Coleman 000
2007 Introduction 000
Introduction: The Crisis at the Heart 000

1. The Need 000
The church today is in crisis. What does it need, and how do pastors perceive that need?
2. The Conflict 000
Before a pastor can make disciples, he needs to count the cost. Nine forces militate against discipleship, and he needs to be prepared for them.
3. The Product 000
What are the biblical foundations of disciple making, and what does a disciple look like?
4. The Role of a Disciple-Making Pastor 000
How does Scripture define the role of pastor? What does he do?
5. The Understanding of a Disciple-Making Pastor 000
He sees the big picture of the church in the redemptive drama. As a result, the pastor also understands the model, means, method, and motive of making Christ known.

6. **The Commitment of a Disciple-Making Pastor**
He not only talks about discipleship but has committed himself to making it a reality in his church.
 7. **The Practices of a Disciple-Making Pastor 000**
He follows four practices that build up the church to take an active part in disciple making.
 8. **The Pastor as Coach 000**
Jesus modeled a six-step teaching method the disciple-making pastor can follow to encourage the church to fulfill the Great Commission.
 9. **Making It Work in the Local Church 000**
Practical vehicles that will help pastors make disciple making a part of their churches are outlined and explained.
- Notes 000

2007 Introduction

Even though this work was published in 1988, I wrote it in 1987, so twenty years have now passed. A lot has happened in those two decades. My children have become adults, my hair has turned white, and I have succeeded and failed. I have seen trends rise and fall, movements come and go, and so many efforts to reach the world for Christ—as ambitious and grandiose as they seemed—disappear. I have changed my mind about some things, as evidenced in the reflections that follow each chapter. Overall, I believe we have made some gains, but they are balanced by the losses. We have gained in better training and in wonderful materials such as books and DVDs. There seems to be a greater unity among evangelicals; the leaders are more focused on what matters. The playing field has been leveled in business competition: India, China, and others can now compete for business with the West. The church in the developing world is greatly enhanced as cell phones and the Internet make information available to them. There are technologies that now can provide needed training to millions of Christians around the globe.

However, the losses are connected to the same technologies. The spread of the consumerism mentality has poisoned much of the good training. The reliance on technology for worship and teaching competes with the need for the personal touch and the development of sacrificial community. As I will mention several times in this book, people cannot be formed in Christ in a climate that is dominated by a consumer mentality. Jesus calls us to come and die, whereas consumer Christianity calls us to come and improve our lives and enhance our personalities. In light of this, I have reserved two overarching observations for the introduction. They are not long, but I pray they will interest you in reading on.

The church continues to try to reach the world without making disciples. I know that all who believe in and follow Jesus are disciples, technically or theologically. I think this kind of belief is far different, however, than what many Americans call belief. The American gospel understands faith as agreement, so saying the prayer or walking down the aisle is the finish line rather than the starting line. I am convinced that everyone who believes in Christ follows Christ. When Jesus commanded us to “make disciples,” He meant more than converts or church members; He meant those who take up their cross daily and follow Him. It has taken hundreds of years and thousands of theologians to diminish this simple fact. We have too many people arguing about what doctrinal statement you can sign rather than what you can do. I find George MacDonald’s words useful at this point:

I will tell you; so make yourself his disciple at once. Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, Do it, or once abstained because he said, Do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him, if you do not do anything he tells you.¹

The church concentrates on getting people to say a prayer or adhere to a theological formula. It is a focus on convincing people to sign up for the ride to heaven without the road of discipleship. I must again point out that this is inadvertent, a product of the consumer culture in which we live. The gospel has been stripped of repentance and the basic call of Christ to deny oneself and follow Him.

Yet there are some encouraging signs that pastors are more interested in making disciples. By *interested* I mean they want to spend time on it, to focus more on the care of souls than the more conventional measures of success. Discipleship is now being conducted under a different name, such as *spiritual formation, mentoring, coaching, spiritual direction*, and so on.

Making a disciple has three dimensions. The first is *deliverance*, which is accomplished via evangelism when a person is reborn and baptized. The second is *development*—what most people call *discipleship* or *personal development*—in which a person is established in the faith. This is ongoing and lifelong, necessary for the care of the soul. The third dimension is *deployment*, in which the developing disciple is commissioned to a mission in the harvest field. A church or pastor committed to making disciples would be focused on this process as the first priority.

Second, it is more important to be a disciple than to have a plan to make disciples. There must be a landfill where all unused or failed plans to make disciples now rest in peace. Those plans had been started with different motives—some to grow the church, others to reach communities, still more to bring depth to the church members—so that anyone coming in contact with them would be changed. But for one reason or another, the plans went sideways, spun off into a ditch, or were shredded by the resistance of a threatened congregant at a late-night meeting. But most of them failed because the pastor was not developing as a disciple. How can one make disciples without practicing the very things he or she advocates?

Before you try to answer that question, let me do so. Hardworking pastors really care about their work and people, but they are too busy organizing, motivating, preaching, and putting out fires to attend to their own souls. So the fire gets low, and sometimes it might be but an ember. This has happened to me at times. It has made me feel like a creaking, old, broken-down car that is sputtering on the side of the road with smoke billowing from beneath the hood and the water gauge on red. Usually I need to be towed back to safety. The challenge for pastors is to be a disciple first, seeking God daily and practicing the spiritual disciplines he or she advocates. Yet that is getting harder to do.

Thomas Friedman, the brilliant columnist for the *New York Times*, talked about this problem. His column's title was "The Age of Interruption." He reflected on spending four days in a Peruvian rain forest:

I have to say, as a wired junkie myself, there was something cleansing about spending four days totally disconnected. It was the best antidote to the disease of our age, what the former Microsoft executive Linda Stone aptly labeled "continuous partial attention." That is, you are multitasking your way through the day, continuously devoting only partial attention to each act or person you encounter. It is the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption.²

The key to our souls is contemplation, the acquired habit of being alone with God to hear His voice. I find it hard to start my day with God if the first thing I do is check my email or phone messages. I hear all the other voices more readily than God's. Friedman points out that a wired society means that everyone is always "in" and never "out." That calls for artificially creating "out." He quips that very soon we might see five-star hotels advertising that every room is guaranteed to come *without* Internet service.

My advice to all pastors is to simply rearrange your life around the practices of Jesus. Look at His life filled with the press of the crowd, the hatred of religious leaders, and the dullness of His disciples. How did He handle it? He prayed, He prayed alone, and He prayed at special times of pressure and decision. He lived a life focused on others, a life that was based on humility and sacrifice powered by love. When we live with a simple commitment to know God's will and do it, then many of those unused and malfunctioning plans begin to work. When pastors are active disciples, they make disciples. This book can be that plan, but it is just ink on paper without the heart and fire to do it.

Introduction

THE CRISIS AT THE HEART

That the church is in crisis is not news. It was born in crisis and has remained in that state until the present day. By definition, *crisis* means “to separate,” “to be at a turning point.” Crisis demands we make a decision, and what makes the decision critical is that the wrong one could lead to disaster.

Hundreds of leaders can name thousands of crises in the American church. Books have been written and messages delivered on the crisis in preaching, evangelism, the Christian family, integrity of both the clergy and Christian businessmen. Others point to crisis in world missions, theological education, Christian colleges, and some throw in the slow death of the Sunday school.

The word *crisis* has become so hackneyed that many have stopped listening to the warnings of modern prophets and feel great skepticism concerning the validity of many so-called crises. The Christian public has become jaded to the fervent cry of their leaders when they speak of life at the edge of the abyss. The nearing apocalypse somehow never seems to materialize; therefore, each subsequent

warning of impending doom seems more and more like “crying wolf.”

In spite of such cynicism, I must insist that the crisis at the heart of the church is deeper, more threatening, and more important than any other. The fact that the church can get by without being confronted with its ramifications makes it so dangerous. Ignoring the crisis is like a man who will not deal with a heart problem. He refuses to recognize the warning signs: his inability to climb stairs with ease, to exercise without pain, or to breathe normally. Life can go on in a limited way under such circumstances. But one day, his heart will suddenly quit, and then it will be too late to restore normal health to the diseased cardiovascular system.

To follow Paul’s analogy of the church being the body of Christ, the crisis is not one of the extremities—the hands, the legs, the feet. In other words, it’s not directly a crisis of function and task. It is a crisis of what governs the body’s ability to do the function and task. *The crisis is at the heart of the church.* The church’s cardiovascular system, its most crucial part, determines the health of the entire body. The condition of the heart, the free and regular flow of blood through veins and arteries, determines the body’s ability to function normally.

The evangelical church has become weak, flabby, and too dependent on artificial means that can only simulate real spiritual power. Churches are too little like training centers to shape up the saints and too much like cardio-pulmonary wards at the local hospital. We have proliferated self-indulgent consumer religion, the what-can-the-church-do-for-me syndrome. We are too easily satisfied with conventional success: bodies, bucks, and buildings. The average Christian resides in the comfort zone of “I pay the pastor to preach, administrate, and counsel. I pay him, he ministers to me. . . . I am the consumer, he is the retailer. . . . I have the needs, he meets them. . . . That’s what I pay for.”

We can most clearly see this in our idolatrous worship of the American superchurch. The bigger it is, and the more its methods mimic the American entrepreneurial spirit, the better. The seduction is complete when the bigger, the more creative, and the more “successful” churches serve as the ultimate by which we measure all other churches.

The all-too-common measure of greatness is the number of people gathered for worship. If 3,000 people gather, some may make the snap judgment “this is a great church.” Measuring greatness this way has two important flaws. First, numbers themselves do not indicate greatness. Large groups can gather for any number of events, such as lynchings, mob riots, or Tupperware parties. The more accurate observation concerning a large church gathering might be “the number of people gathered here indicates that those leading the church—the pastor and the music leader—must be highly talented.” That would be a good and generally true judgment.

The second flaw of such a superficial measure is that you have asked the wrong question: “How many people are present?” The right question is “What are these people like?” What kind of families do they have, are they honest in business, are they trained to witness, do they know the Bible, are they penetrating their workplaces, their neighborhoods, reaching friends and associates for Christ? Are they making the difference in the world for Christ that He expects? These are the right questions, the issues of the heart, and the criteria for greatness.

The evangelical church has lost the will to ask the right questions and the courage to face the answers. The critical decision facing the church is will we commit ourselves to the issues of the heart? Will we repent of our foolish ways and turn to the work Christ commanded? But what are the issues of the heart? What is the cardiovascular system of the church?

George Orwell wrote, “We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of

intelligent men.” In today’s church, the obvious is revolutionary. Nothing is as treacherous as the obvious. Like walking a tightrope in a high wind, understanding and executing the obvious is tricky. The obvious restated and applied shakes the church at its foundation. When you state it, inoculated leaders nod their sleepy heads. When you apply it, they scoff and label you as radical, inexperienced, and parachurch.

What obvious truth causes the saints to squirm? Simply this: *the church exists for mission*. The church lives by mission as fire exists by oxygen. *The church does not exist for itself*. This collides head-on with the self-indulgent ego-driven psychobabble mentality that dominates evangelicalism. Look at the bestselling Christian books, listen to the television evangelist, talk to the average parishioner; the common thread is a preoccupation with felt needs. If the church is going to obey Christ, this must stop. Christians won’t stop having needs, real or felt. However, the preoccupation and prioritizing of felt needs over Christ-commanded activity must stop.

The focus of a church’s staff, leadership, and core congregation is not to be inward, but outward. The church’s mission is penetration into the world, as its metaphors instruct us. Salt, light, leaven, army, ambassadors, pilgrims, all denote movement and penetration. The church grows when members become more effective in penetration.

Like any crisis of the cardiovascular system, this has left the church weak and dependent. It has placed pastors in the difficult role of coaches trying to field a basketball team from a hospital ward. The players may try hard and do their best, but they won’t make the National Basketball Association. As a sad result, the church functions at a great disadvantage. Therefore, the church is much less than God intended. Tragically, it doesn’t need to be this way, and we must gather the courage to fight it and change it.

The Cure Introduced

Only one kind of person will penetrate the world, and the failure of the church to produce this kind of person is the error that has thrown it into crisis. *The crisis at the heart of the church is a crisis of product.* What kind of person does the church produce? The Christ-commanded product is a person called disciple. Christ commanded His church to “*make disciples*” (Matt. 28:19). Jesus described a disciple as one who abides in Him, is obedient, bears fruit, glorifies God, has joy, and loves (see John 15:7–17).

It makes so much sense. The kind of person who glorifies God best is called a disciple. The command of Christ to His disciples was “*make disciples,*” because disciples penetrate their world. Disciples reproduce themselves, which leads to multiplication. Multiplication is the key to reaching the world and fulfilling the Great Commission.

How the church has missed this obvious mandate can only be attributed to a diabolical scheme. The crisis at the heart of the church is that we give disciple making lip service, but do not practice it. We have lost the integrity of our mission. The cardiovascular system of the body will not get better until we change our ways and prioritize the production of healthy, reproducing men and women who will penetrate their world. *The cardiovascular system of the church is the principles that produce the right product.* When it produces and reproduces the right product, like any healthy body, it will be able to carry out its function. When we obey Christ’s commission, two good things happen: we create healthy Christians; healthy Christians reproduce, and the body grows, then multiplies, and the world becomes evangelized.

Not much will change until we raise the issue and create controversy, until the American church is challenged to take the Great Commission seriously, until pastors are willing to start reproducing themselves through others, to prepare people to be self-feeding Christians, until con-

gregations allow pastors to spend most of their time on teaching and training the spiritually well minority, rather than servicing the whims and desires of the unmotivated and disobedient majority, until pastors can be unleashed from evangelical “busy work.” It must be done; we can’t allow this to continue; there must be change.

The Need

The Condition of the Church

I have thrown down the gauntlet. I maintain that the evangelical church is weak, self-indulgent, and superficial, that it has been thoroughly disciplined by its culture. As Jesus said, “Every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40 RSV). Furthermore, I believe the crisis of the church is one of product, the kind of people being produced. I propose the solution to be obedience to Christ’s commission to “make disciples,” to teach Christians to obey everything Christ commanded.

Do I stand alone in my critical analysis of the church? Others more wise and experienced than I maintain the same thesis. The late Elton Trueblood has said:

Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian Church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not. As soon as we recognize Christ’s intention to make His Church a militant company we understand at once that the conventional arrangement cannot suffice. There is no real chance of victory in a campaign if ninety per cent of the soldiers are untrained and

uninvolved, but that is exactly where we stand now. Most alleged Christians do not now understand that loyalty to Christ means sharing personally in His ministry, going or staying as the situation requires.¹

A 1980 Gallup poll indicated that of the 22 million churchgoing evangelicals, only 7 percent had taken any evangelistic training and only 2 percent had introduced another person to Jesus Christ. How would you like to march into battle with only 7 percent of your troops trained and only 2 percent with combat experience? While I pray these figures have changed over the years, I would guess that today's figures are much the same.²

This illustrates the need for asking the right question. How could the 3,000 gathered for worship compose a great church, if only 7 percent were trained to witness and only 2 percent had introduced another to Christ? The test of a congregation, apart from personal holiness, is how effectively members penetrate the world. American churches are filled with pew-filling, sermon-tasting, spiritual schizophrenics, whose belief and behavior are not congruent.

Christians are not well trained, largely because pastors have not worked out a means of helping people do what Jesus has told them they should. As a result they feel a great deal of frustration and guilt.

Most churches grow by transfer. The rule of the day is the rotation of the saints. The number of real conversions to Christ by some "great churches" is meager. Instead churches with strong preaching and great music programs attract large numbers. Therefore, people think that the church is great and the staff does its job. In reality the churches with the best programs are crowded, along with the best restaurants and theaters, because people like excellence.

In the relationship between clergy and laity, the clergy have become professional performers and the parishioners the audience. The better the show, the larger the crowd. All

this proves is that outstanding performance attracts people. It means little more than that; in no way does it faithfully reflect the priorities of Christ for His Church. As Elton Trueblood has stated, "Cheap Christianity can usually pull a pretty good attendance on Sunday morning. It is cheap whenever the people think of themselves as spectators at a performance."³ Trueblood goes on to point out that emphasis on how many gather for worship is pre-Christian and pagan. "We fall back into an Old Testament mind-set, in which we look mostly at how many people come into the temple for the ritual. That was what counted most under the Old Covenant. Meanwhile, we forget Jesus' words in Matthew 12:6, 'I tell you something greater than the temple is here.'"⁴ You can always get a crowd, if you demand very little and put on a show.

Deceptively, such success blinds us to the real issues. Are the Christians healthy, is reproduction taking place, are people being trained to be disciple makers? What is being asked of the people, are they living and serving the way God planned? The purpose of gathering Christians is for training so that their penetration ability is improved.

Looking at the church twenty years ago, pollster George Barna commented:

There is strong support among Christians for the notion that an individual is free to do whatever pleases him, as long as it does not hurt others. Two out of five Christians maintain that such thinking is proper, thus effectively rejecting the unconditional code of ethics and morality taught in the Bible. Three out of ten Christians agree that nothing in life is more important than having fun and being happy. Christians express such love for money, possessions and other material objects that their Christianity cannot be said to rule their hearts. For instance, more than half of the Christian public believes that they never have enough money to buy what they need, nor what they want. One out of four believers thinks that the more you have the more successful you are. *The fact that the proportion of*

Christians who affirm these values is equivalent to the proportion of non-Christians who hold similar views indicates how meaningless Christianity has been in the lives of millions of professed believers.⁵

Even though Barna's findings are over twenty years old, they still ring true. If anything, the problem is more acute now than then. Not only are Christians untrained to penetrate their spheres of influence, their values have slipped as well. Now the difference between Christians and non-Christians has blurred and is fast disappearing. My own experience as a pastor substantiates this belief. Christians' use of money, priorities of time, attitudes about work and leisure, divorce and remarriage, increasingly reflect culture rather than Scripture. Therefore, the church is weak in skills and weak in character.

When Os Guinness says, "We have left out substance, it is no longer the holies of holies, but vanities of vanities . . . we worship the god of the gut, no deeper than our last experience,"⁶ he speaks of a lack of strength in the church. George Gallup's findings support this view. Only 42 percent of Christians know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and most of them know that because of television. Those who could identify the writers of the Gospels or name the Ten Commandments were fewer. Evangelicals show a startling biblical illiteracy. Bible teaching and learning are different. Among evangelical pastors a major myopia exists on this very issue. Sermons do not prepare people to live effective Christian lives. Christians evidence a serious lack of depth of both knowledge and good experience.

Francis Schaeffer warned us: "Here is the great evangelical disaster—the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this—namely accommodation: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age."⁷

We see the bitter fruits of biblical illiteracy and subsequent accommodation in some sensitive ways. George

Barna recently did a study among 10,000 evangelical youth. The results show the alarming rate of decline of values among churchgoing evangelical teens. By eighteen years of age, 43 percent had experienced sexual intercourse. Twenty-four percent considered premarital sex as acceptable. Thirty-nine percent found other sexual activity as normal. Fifty-five percent could not state that premarital intercourse was wrong. A startling find was when those who had engaged in intercourse were asked if they were forced into sex against their will, 47 percent of the boys and 65 percent of the girls said they were pressured.

The transfer of values and priorities from parents to children is weak because the majority of parents in evangelical churches have an accommodated value system. They are not committed as a whole; therefore, the children reflect the same slippage of commitment.

George Gallup says that among evangelicals, there are a highly committed group of 10 percent. These people carry the load and will make the difference. These nonaccommodators are the “hell-bent for glory group.” From them the 7 percent trained for evangelism come. Ten percent highly committed means that effective values transfer operates at ten percent efficiency.

I will develop this in full later, but for now I need only say that the truth we have sacrificed is the command for quality. The Great Commission has been worshiped, but not obeyed. *The church has tried to get world evangelization without disciple making.* The impetuosity of human nature and cultural pressure to get quick results have caused pastors to take every shortcut. Shortcuts don’t work; most of the time we end up starting over again. Only one road leads to world evangelism: disciple making. The truth that disciple making is the key to world evangelization, because it is the key to reproduction and multiplication, refuses to go away. We have sacrificed disciple making on the altar of cultural success, ego gratification, and immediate need. This is my version of the great evangelical disaster.

I would cast my lot with the former editor of *Christianity Today*, the late Dr. Kenneth Kantzer:

My opinion—unprovable, I admit—is that evangelicalism is weaker now than it was fifteen years ago, or fifty years ago. People often think it is stronger because they hear more about it in the public media. It certainly has a better press today than it had anytime since the First World War. Then, too, evangelicals now have a greater sense of their own identity than they did earlier in this century. But the influence of evangelical faith and evangelical ethics on our society is less. As a culture, our nation and, indeed Western Europe are moving away from Biblical Christianity.⁸

I can't prove that the evangelical church is in as much trouble as I say. But I am satisfied to cast my lot with these men: Elton Trueblood, Donald Bloesch, George Barna, Os Guinness, Francis Schaeffer, Kenneth Kantzer, and others. Years ago I heard Billy Graham say that 95 percent of all Christians live defeated lives. I was skeptical concerning such a high figure, but I am no longer. Something must be done about the sickness of Christianity, and I think the solution is obvious. We must upgrade our product; we must produce healthy, reproducing believers who impact their world for Christ. How to do that is the heart of this work.

The Expressed Desire of Pastors

Pastors want to do what is right. I don't know a single pastor who doesn't desire to produce healthy Christians. All agree with this book's thesis that the evangelical church needs revitalization. They want to make disciples and help fulfill the Great Commission, but many don't know how. That's right, it surprised me too. At first I was skeptical about the need for instruction in how to structure a church for disciple making.

Too often we pastors become jaded concerning seminars, books, and other professional helps, because we see the church through the narrow lens of the successful. We survey the major success stories of evangelicalism and conclude that the church is in pretty good shape. “Look at all those successful churches; they don’t have that disciple-making philosophy. They have more people; they send more missionaries; they have tremendous programs for almost every need group in society.” But this view has a huge blind spot, because when we look at the church through the eyes of the successful, we see only 5 percent.

Let me be clear: I don’t expect to reach the upper 5 percent of evangelicalism. Highly talented and creative entrepreneurial pastoral models dominate the upper 5 percent. They are very effective, God greatly uses them to minister to the masses, and they can offer a few principles and hints that can assist others in their work. But as models, they do more harm than good. Most pastors would do better if they had never heard of or been exposed to the upper 5 percent.

The upper 5 percent present the average pastor with an unrealistic, unreachable, guilt-producing model that threatens his ministry. Pressure to be like them has destroyed many. Instead of blaming the upper 5 percent for their work, we should thank God for them, and leave it at that. While I hope the upper 5 percent will adopt the philosophy of this book, they are not my target. My message is to the 95 percent of pastors who want to build healthy, effective churches. I propose an obvious, simple thesis that a pastor with average skills can execute.

If we measured hunger for help among the upper 5 percent, we would get a low reading. But in the lower 95 percent, there exists a famished army of pastors, ready to consume helpful material. I base this on the contact I have with pastors. After the publication of my first book, *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker*, I started getting phone calls, letters, and visits from interested pastors. The comments

generally went something like, “I agree with what you are saying, but how do I implement this kind of philosophy in my church?” After speaking at conferences or talking with denominational leaders, again came the comments, “Yes, we agree; this is what we want, but how?” I found a great distinction between desire and know-how. This motivated me to do three things.

The first action was to plant a church. In June of 1984 I left an established church and started one in San Diego. My motivation was to see if installing disciple making at the heart of the church would work. Doing that requires three things:

1. The pastor must possess convictions concerning disciple making and declare it as top priority from the pulpit.
2. The philosophy and its goals should be published in church literature and should be reviewed by leadership and reported to the congregation annually. This provides for a form of accountability for all concerned, and it tells the church how it is doing.
3. The disciple-making philosophy must be modeled at the church-leadership level. The pastor and leaders should be effective disciple makers themselves.

I wanted to see these principles at work from the ground floor. God has richly blessed these priorities, because they are His. Today the church is healthy, growing, and many exciting ministries have emerged. From planting the church, the second important action was born.

The second action was to recruit other pastors and plant more churches. I did not want to plant them just to plant new churches. I wanted to plant churches that shared the same philosophy of disciple making, that would reproduce, that would produce a healthy product and multiply themselves throughout the world. Therefore, we actively recruited men who shared our thinking. They raised their

financial support and joined us in San Diego. I quickly learned that while these men agreed with the philosophy, like other pastors, they did not have a handle on how to implement it. They asked the same questions I got in the letters and phone calls.

As a result we developed a center that would give the pastors on-the-job training. We started with ten people, composed of existing local pastors and our recruits. The training environment has been dynamic and challenging, and teaching pastors on the job has demanded all my ability and more. I have had a great deal of help in developing this philosophy. In the future we would like to export the training-center concept to facilitate planting disciple-making churches in other regions.

The training remains so valuable to the pastors that the third action was unavoidable. You are reading the third step, the book *The Disciple-Making Pastor*. The book's objective is to give pastors the philosophical base and the model by which they can implement disciple making in their churches. It is not the only way; it is simply the way we did it.

I have built the model around the training methods of Jesus. Chapter 9, "Making It Work in the Local Church," will take the reader through a four-phase model that attempts to apply His training methods in the church. The fuller explanation can be found in my first book, *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker*. The model shows how the principal phases of Christ's training can work in concert with the standard vehicles that already exist in most churches. My experience in teaching others how to do discipleship in the church has shown me it requires two things: The pastor has to have a philosophical system and deep convictions concerning the system; and he needs a model, a gridwork, a means to apply his philosophy. That is the purpose of the model.

I am thoroughly convinced God wants disciple making to be the heart of local church ministry. My experience with

pastors confirms that most of them agree. I do not present a model or means for building a culturally successful church, nor can I guarantee that this teaching will give you a big church. In fact, I have good reason to believe that in the initial stages, the philosophy will retard your numerical growth. I am proposing the principles God esteems in His people and His church. I suggest that when the church prioritizes these principles and pastors resurrect their appointed roles as disciple makers, the church will be healthy and honor God. So I address myself to those hungry 95 percent of pastors who desire to build healthy Christians and dynamic, obedient churches that reproduce.

There are two compelling reasons to place disciple making at the heart of the church. First, the need is seen in the condition of the church; its weakness is a mandate for corrective action. Second, pastors have strongly expressed that they want to take corrective action and place disciple making at the heart of the local church. They are asking for a means and a model. This book attempts to give both. But before we plunge ahead, let us consider the obstacles.

Further Reflections

Twenty years ago I wrote that “the evangelical church is weak, self-indulgent, and superficial, that it has been thoroughly disciplined by its culture” (see page 00). Is it still true? Was it true in the first place? It doesn’t take a genius to criticize the church. You don’t have to be smart to attack this imperfect group of people who seem slow to change and even slower to get into line with what God wants. What is so confusing about “make disciples”? What don’t we understand about “teaching them to obey everything I commanded you”?

What a man sees at forty is different than what he sees at sixty. At forty a man is climbing the mountain, his family is young, his legs are strong, and he is full of dreams

for his future and ambitious to do great things for God. Twenty years later his children have children, his knees ache, his feet hurt, he's on medication, and he's short on future. He has crested the hill and reached some goals, but he has also failed, and he knows his failings very well. Maybe he realizes that he has been weak, self-indulgent, and superficial. When he puts on his Faconnable shirt and Ralph Lauren slacks and races for his car, double-checking for his Treo 650 and iPod, he realizes that he has been thoroughly disciplined by his culture. Therefore, now his judgments are less shrill and are tempered with humility, and they may be more accurate. His vision is still strong. It could be that what he now says is seasoned with wisdom. His heart still burns for God more than ever, but now perhaps he realizes it's not entirely up to him to fulfill the Great Commission. It might be that loving those near him is the highest priority.

Okay, I confess, I have changed. One thing that is consistent with my thinking, however, is that I am a fan of patience and perseverance—not for my benefit but for obedience to God. The past twenty years have proven that those who have both of those characteristics are the ones to admire. These qualities are essential if we are to teach people to obey everything that Christ commanded. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: “Forming people in Christ is a slow work, so it can't be hurried; it is an urgent work, so it can't be delayed.”⁹

Is the church in as much trouble as I claimed twenty years ago? I must tell you, it is worse. There are many big churches—by most accounts around 1200—that host 2000 or more Sunday attendees.¹⁰ Basic math tells us that this is about 0.35 percent of America's 350,000 churches. The megachurch is more characterized by talent than any other characteristic. God gives out the talent in different measures (see Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:11). Some people just have a greater measure of it, which creates its own dynamic. But talent doesn't make disciples. It gathers, motivates, and

mobilizes, and what it creates is determined by conviction, environment, patience, and perseverance. Sometimes the corollary to talent is the anointing of the Spirit; other times it is creativity and clever packaging that create a buzz, which leads to a positive word-of-mouth movement. And when “spiritual lightning,” or sudden growth, strikes, we get the “superchurch” that changes the religious landscape.

When leaders of a megachurch are committed to making disciples, the church becomes an encouragement to all within its influence. We can thank and praise God for that work. However, when they are committed to measuring their progress by bodies, bucks, and buildings, they demonstrate that they have been seduced by the culture.

An easy mistake to make is to think that the megachurch and its megastars can be reproduced and multiplied. The temptation for ordinary leaders to believe they are extraordinary is powerful. By *extraordinary* I mean equipped or destined to lead something large and well known. Many leaders with lesser amounts of gifting and buzz can be and are extraordinary in their realm. When leaders make it their goal to lead a large ministry, they commit themselves to something that works 0.35 percent of the time. This, I believe, is a fool’s errand. The goal is not something that they can control. Also, it is devastating when leaders measure themselves by a megastandard. The measure of a person is faithfulness, not numerical success. The real issue continues to be the kind of people we are producing in our churches. What is the body of Christ like when the lights are out, the doors are locked, and the parking lot is empty?

The late Elton Trueblood’s statement in 1979 still rings true today:

Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian Church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not.¹¹

George Barna confirms Trueblood's claim in his research. One of his best efforts was his 2001 book *Growing True Disciples*, in which he painfully extracted the real state of disciple making in the American church. His conclusion was a bit sobering:

The chief barrier to effective discipleship is not that people do not have the ability to become spiritually mature, but they lack the passion, perspective, priorities, and perseverance to develop their spiritual lives. Most Christians know that spiritual growth is important, personally beneficial, and expected, *but few attend churches that push them to grow or provide the resources necessary to facilitate that growth*. Few believers have relationships that hold them accountable for spiritual development. In the end it boils down to personal priorities. For most of us, regardless of our intellectual assent to the importance of Christian growth, our passions lay elsewhere—and our schedule and energy follow those passions. *Most believers, it turns out, are satisfied to engage in a process without regard for the product.*¹²

Barna's research provides hard data to the claim *that the church is trying to reach the world without making disciples*. It didn't work twenty years ago; it doesn't work now.

Distracted Disciples

I don't want to make an argument that the church is in decline because attendance is in decline and then turn around and claim that what really matters in the church is not attendance. The decline is not as much about fewer people attending church as it is about them attending less. A number of years ago, faithful attendees were present eight out of every ten Sundays. More recently, that ratio has changed to six out of every ten Sundays.¹³ Much of this decline is due to lifestyle options, the growth of alternative activities for families, and a diminished sense of

commitment. It is indicative of church leaders' failure to challenge the congregation and, more importantly, lead them by example. This decline requires us to address the related pathology of consumer-based churches.

I continue to believe that pastors do not neglect making disciples on purpose. The daily grind of local church life drains the strength of leaders, and they can easily lose focus. Also, many of them have not received any training in how to lead others. And often pastors have a wrong notion of discipleship—that it is exclusively a one-on-one mentoring relationship.

Consumer-Based Churches

When I use the term *consumerism*, I am not thinking primarily about economics. I have warned Christians in India, Rwanda, Kenya, and Kazakhstan of its dangers. It is more the philosophy or worldview that shapes us into consumers.

To think of oneself as a consumer is natural. We all consume every day. It is obvious that to a degree, being a consumer and purchasing products is a necessity. Food, shelter, clothing, and related items are necessary to sustain life. The trouble begins when we take on this philosophy, namely, "It's primarily about me, I am in the center, and my needs are preeminent." The consumer mind-set is that whatever is manufactured is for me to consider buying. It puts the self in the center of life, and all the world's commodities are in orbit around the self. Advertising is designed to create needs in us that we didn't even know we had. The customer is always right; the customer is in the driver's seat.

Similarly, the consumer-based person believes that the ministry of the church is to meet his or her needs. "We are looking for a church that will meet our needs." Isn't that what most of us say? What is the music like? How

can I worship? Do the sermons feed me? Will the youth program take care of my kids? And the questions and the lists go on. The church then gets caught up in meeting expectations, fearing that people will not visit or stay, or, even worse, will leave after a while because their expectations were not met.

The problem with all this is that we can't make disciples based on a consumer mentality. Sure, we can run programs, have a wonderful small group ministry, and have an exciting curriculum that people attend in droves. *But we cannot expect that people will truly be formed into the image of Christ.* Jesus lived for others, and as his disciples we are called to do the same. Our churches exist for others. We don't do missions for ourselves; we do them for others. And then our needs are met—our real needs for purpose, joy, and knowing that our lives are right before God. That is why we must drive a stake through the heart of consumer Christianity, and this act must begin with our leaders.

“Make disciples” implies intentionality and process. Disciple-making doesn’t just happen because a church exists and people show up. It is a deliberate process. Considering the modifying participles of “going . . . baptizing . . . teaching” help us recognize this process. It must include evangelizing (going to new people and new places), establishing (baptizing new believers and teaching obedience), and equipping (teaching believers to also make disciples). How does your church evangelize, establish, and equip? Pastors are not called to preach convert-making sermons or scholar-making sermons. They are called to preach disciple-making sermons. This means that they must craft sermons that will evangelize, establish, and equip.