

FROM CONVERTS TO DISCIPLE-MAKERS: Building a Culture of Discipleship in Your Church

The Great Commission is not fulfilled merely when people become converts. It is fulfilled as converts become disciples, and as disciples mature into disciple-makers. The goal of the church is not simply to produce people who attend services, participate in programs, or accumulate biblical knowledge. The goal is to cultivate mature followers of Jesus Christ who are equipped and committed to helping others become mature followers of Christ as well.

Introduction

Consider a familiar scenario. Suppose someone attends your church this Sunday morning. That individual hears the gospel, God graciously opens his or her heart, repentance takes place, and genuine faith is placed in Jesus Christ. A sinner has passed from death to life. We rightly rejoice whenever God accomplishes the miracle of conversion.

But I want us to consider a question that receives considerably less attention: What happens on Monday?

More specifically, where will that person be spiritually twelve months from now? Will he know how to study the Bible for himself? Will she know how to pray? Will he understand the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith? Will she know how to battle temptation and pursue holiness? Will he be meaningfully connected to the life of the local church? Will she be actively serving other believers? Will he know how to communicate the gospel clearly? And eventually, will that believer be prepared to disciple someone else?

Those questions reveal an important challenge. Most churches have given serious consideration to how people come to Christ. Most churches also devote significant effort to preaching and teaching the truths of Scripture. Yet far fewer churches have developed an intentional and clearly defined process for helping people progressively become like Christ.

Let me suggest four diagnostic questions for us to consider. First, is your church producing mature believers, or primarily regular attendees? Second, could you explain your church's discipleship process in less than two minutes? Third, if a new believer entered your church this Sunday, would you know what his or her next spiritual step should be? Fourth, who in your church is intentionally discipling someone else?

Every person in our churches is formed by something. Cultural influences continually shape what people love, value, believe, and pursue. The question is whether the church is intentionally forming men and women into faithful followers of Jesus Christ. That kind of discipleship will not happen accidentally. It requires deliberate, biblical, relational, and sustained intentionality.

We Must Recover the Mission

Matthew 28:18–20

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The central command of this passage is not simply “go.” Jesus did not merely instruct His followers to evangelize the lost. Nor did He command them simply to gather crowds, develop ministries, increase attendance, or bring more people into church buildings. Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples.”

Certainly, the Great Commission includes evangelism. Conversion is essential. The gospel must be proclaimed. Lost people must hear the good news of Jesus Christ and respond in repentance and faith. But the commission does not end at conversion.

Jesus describes the disciple-making task as including baptism and the ongoing instruction of believers so that they learn to obey all that He has commanded. Therefore, conversion is not the finish line of the Christian life. It is the starting line. Disciple-making begins as we take the gospel to unbelievers, and it continues as those who believe are taught to live faithfully under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship can therefore be understood as:

The process of learning the teachings of Scripture, internalizing those truths so that they shape one's beliefs and convictions, and then living in accordance with those truths in everyday life.

We might further define discipleship as:

The intentional process of helping people progressively submit every area of their lives to the authority of Jesus Christ and equipping them to help others do the same.

There are two essential dimensions to that definition. First, discipleship aims at spiritual maturity. We are helping people increasingly live like Jesus Christ. We teach them to think biblically, obey faithfully, love rightly, worship sincerely, serve sacrificially, and progressively reflect the character of Christ. Discipleship involves more than transferring biblical information. It seeks the transformation of the whole person.

Second, discipleship aims at multiplication. We are not helping people grow spiritually merely for their own benefit. We are preparing them to help others grow as well. A disciple is not merely a person who knows biblical truths. A disciple learns, obeys, follows, matures, and progressively becomes like the Master. And ultimately, a mature disciple reproduces.

Luke 6:40

“A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.”

That is one of the fundamental goals of discipleship. The apprentice increasingly resembles the master. The learner begins to adopt the character, priorities, convictions, values, and practices of the teacher. In Christian discipleship, however, the ultimate objective is not to produce people who resemble us. Our responsibility is to help people increasingly resemble Christ.

We Must Know What We Are Trying to Produce

One of the significant challenges facing churches in discipleship is that we often possess an abundance of activity without a clearly defined destination. We have preaching ministries and teaching series. We have Sunday school classes and Adult Bible Fellowships. We have small groups, men's ministries, women's ministries, student ministries, conferences, Bible studies, retreats, seminars, and special events. These ministries are excellent and each may contribute significantly to spiritual growth. But there is a more foundational question that every church must ask: What are all of these ministries intentionally producing in the lives of our saints?

I would encourage every church leadership team to work carefully through five questions:

First, what should a mature disciple know?

A mature believer should possess an increasing knowledge of Scripture, the gospel, foundational theology, the storyline of the Bible, the character of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

Biblical knowledge is not the entirety of discipleship. A person may possess extensive biblical knowledge and still demonstrate significant spiritual immaturity. Nevertheless, it is impossible to develop mature disciples while allowing them to remain biblically ignorant.

Second, what should a mature disciple believe?

By this, I am not merely referring to doctrinal statements that a person can recite. The more significant question is: What convictions govern that person's life? What does that believer hold so deeply that those convictions shape marriage, parenting, work, finances, relationships, sexuality, suffering, priorities, decision-making, and the stewardship of time? Discipleship moves biblical truth into the convictions of the heart.

Third, what should a mature disciple practice?

A mature believer should progressively develop consistent patterns of Bible study, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship, stewardship, service, evangelism, confession, holiness, and obedience. Christianity is not merely a body of truth to be affirmed; it is a life to be lived.

Fourth, what should a mature disciple value?

Mature disciples should increasingly value Christ, biblical truth, the church, fellow believers, the lost, service, mission, faithfulness, holiness, and the glory of God. True spiritual maturity changes not only what people know and what they do, but also what they love.

Fifth, what should a mature disciple be able to reproduce?

This is the question churches often neglect. Can this person help another believer grow? Could this individual sit across the table from a new Christian and open the Scriptures with him? Could she explain the gospel clearly? Could he teach another person how to study the Bible? Could she help someone understand prayer? Could he walk alongside someone who is battling temptation? Could she encourage a believer who is suffering, confused, discouraged, or spiritually immature and faithfully point that person toward biblical truth? In other words: Can this person disciple someone else?

A church without a clearly defined picture of spiritual maturity may generate tremendous amounts of activity without ever knowing whether its people are becoming mature followers of Christ. Programs indicate to people where to attend. A discipleship philosophy shows people who they are becoming.

We Must Build a Clear Pathway

Once we have identified what a mature disciple should look like, the next question is equally important: How do we intentionally help people move toward that maturity? Every church will structure the discipleship process somewhat differently, and I am not suggesting that there is one curriculum, one specific program, or one sequence that every church must adopt. Churches differ in size, context, resources, and ministry philosophy. The specific terminology may vary, and the structure may look different from one congregation to another. What must not vary, however, is the commitment to intentionality.

A new believer should not have to wander through the ministries of a church hoping that, somewhere along the way, he or she will eventually mature spiritually. We should be able to help that believer understand what comes next. There should be a recognizable pathway that begins with conversion and progressively moves a believer toward maturity,

service, disciple-making, and ultimately multiplication. The purpose of such a pathway is not to reduce discipleship to a program, but to ensure that we are deliberately helping people take meaningful steps toward becoming more like Jesus Christ.

The pathway begins with conversion. A person hears the gospel, repents of sin, and places faith in Jesus Christ. We rightly celebrate that moment, but we must also recognize that salvation marks the beginning of the discipleship process rather than its conclusion. The new believer now needs to be established in the faith, grounded in biblical truth, connected meaningfully to the church, and taught how to live as a follower of Christ.

Step 1 — Establish Them in the Gospel and the Church

The first step is to establish the new believer firmly in the gospel itself. We should not assume that because someone has responded to the gospel, he or she therefore understands its depth, implications, and ongoing significance. A new Christian needs to understand grace, repentance, faith, justification, assurance, identity in Christ, baptism, and the importance of the local church. These truths form the foundation upon which the rest of the Christian life is built.

New believers often bring old assumptions, cultural ideas, previous religious experiences, theological confusion, and deeply ingrained patterns of thinking with them into the Christian life. For that reason, gospel instruction must continue after conversion. We are not simply teaching believers how they were saved; we are helping them understand how the gospel now shapes the entirety of their Christian life. The grace that saves them is also the grace that teaches them how to live.

Step 2 — Establish Them in the Word

The next step is to establish the believer in Scripture. Churches often tell new Christians that they need to read their Bibles, and that counsel is certainly correct. The problem is that many new believers have never been taught how to read the Bible carefully or profitably. They may open the Scriptures with sincere desire but have little understanding of how to observe a passage, interpret it in context, or apply its truth faithfully.

Therefore, we must do more than tell people to study the Bible. We must teach them how. We need to show them how to observe what a passage actually says, how to understand what it means, and how to consider its implications for everyday life. The goal is not simply to increase the amount of biblical information a Christian consumes. The goal is to help believers encounter the Word of God in such a way that it increasingly reshapes their thinking, convictions, desires, priorities, and conduct. A mature disciple must eventually learn how to feed himself spiritually from the Scriptures.

Step 3 — Establish Spiritual Disciplines

As believers are grounded in the gospel and in the Word, we must also help them establish the spiritual disciplines that sustain a faithful walk with Christ. They need to learn how to pray, how to worship, how to confess sin, how to depend upon the Holy Spirit, how to practice generosity, and how to participate meaningfully in Christian fellowship. These disciplines should not be presented merely as religious duties, but as ordinary expressions of life in communion with God.

New believers also need to see what the Christian life looks like outside of formal church settings. They need someone who can help them understand what it means to walk with God on Tuesday afternoon, not merely what it means to attend worship on Sunday morning. How should a believer respond when discouraged? What should he do when tempted? How should she pray when she does not feel like praying? How does a Christian make difficult decisions? What happens after a believer sins and fails? How does faith shape the ordinary pressures, disappointments, and responsibilities of life? These are not secondary questions. These are discipleship questions, and they are often best addressed in the context of intentional relationships.

Step 4 — Establish a Biblical Worldview

As believers continue to mature, they must learn to understand all of life through the lens of Scripture. Biblical discipleship cannot be limited to isolated spiritual activities or disconnected Bible lessons. The mature believer must learn to think biblically about marriage, family, sexuality, money, work, government, suffering, ethics, culture, truth, relationships, and the many challenges that accompany life in a fallen world.

Romans 12 speaks of transformation through the renewing of the mind. That renewal involves learning to reject the patterns, assumptions, and priorities of the world and replacing them with thinking that is increasingly shaped by God's revealed truth. A mature disciple does not simply know a collection of Bible verses. He or she develops a biblical framework through which all of life is understood and evaluated. The aim is not merely to teach Christians what the Bible says about certain subjects, but to train them to ask consistently, "How should Scripture shape the way I understand and respond to this?"

Step 5 — Move Them into Service

As believers mature, they must also be moved intentionally into meaningful service. Ephesians 4 makes clear that gifted leaders are given to the church not so that they can perform all the ministry themselves, but so that they can equip the

saints for the work of ministry. Healthy discipleship therefore moves believers beyond a consumer mentality and helps them recognize that they have been called and equipped to serve the body of Christ.

At some point, the maturing Christian must begin moving from the question, “What can this church do for me?” to the question, “How has God equipped me to serve His church?” Church leaders should help believers identify appropriate opportunities for service and place them alongside mature Christians from whom they can learn. Let them observe ministry. Give them opportunities to participate. Train them, correct them when necessary, encourage them, and gradually entrust them with greater responsibility as they demonstrate faithfulness.

Service should never be viewed as something separate from discipleship. It is one of the means through which disciples grow. Believers mature as they begin using their gifts, carrying responsibility, serving others sacrificially, and participating actively in the life and mission of the church.

Step 6 — Develop Them as Disciple-Makers

The pathway must eventually lead to multiplication. At some point, we must look at the maturing believer and say, in essence, “Now I want you to begin helping someone else.” This is a crucial transition, because it moves discipleship from personal growth to spiritual reproduction.

One of the dangers in many churches is that mature believers can spend decades primarily receiving. They attend classes, listen to sermons, participate in studies, and accumulate substantial biblical knowledge. All of that can be valuable, but eventually mature believers must move from learning to teaching, from receiving to serving, and from being discipled to discipling others. They need opportunities to take responsibility for the spiritual growth of another person.

This does not mean that every believer must become a formal teacher or ministry leader. It means that every mature Christian should increasingly be capable of helping another person follow Jesus Christ. At some point, a believer should be able to open the Scriptures with someone else, pray with that person, answer basic questions, offer biblical encouragement, model faithful living, and walk alongside another believer in the process of spiritual growth.

A simple pathway might therefore look like this:

**Conversion → Foundations → Spiritual Disciplines → Biblical
Worldview → Service → Disciple-Making → Multiplication**

Terminology itself is not the most important issue. Your church may use different names, combine certain stages, or structure the process differently. What matters

is that the movement is intentional and understandable. The practical question every leadership team should be able to answer is: What is the next spiritual step for every person in our church?

If the answer is merely, “We hope they attend something,” then we have programs, but we do not yet have a clear discipleship pathway. A healthy discipleship pathway does not simply tell people where to go next. It helps them understand who they are becoming and equips them to take the next meaningful step toward maturity in Christ.

We Must Use the Whole Church to Make Disciples

One of the common misconceptions surrounding discipleship is that it is simply one ministry among many within the church. We speak of worship ministry, children's ministry, student ministry, missions' ministry, men's ministry, women's ministry, and discipleship ministry, as though discipleship were simply another department within the organizational structure of the congregation. But biblically understood, discipleship should not be confined to one program or one area of ministry. Discipleship should describe what the entire church is seeking to accomplish through all its ministries.

Every ministry of the church should contribute in some way to the spiritual formation of God's people. The sermon, the classroom, the small group, the children's ministry, the student ministry, the counseling ministry, and the opportunities for service should all work together toward the common objective of helping people know Christ, obey His Word, mature in their faith, and eventually help others do the same.

I find it helpful to picture discipleship as an umbrella. Under that umbrella are several important environments (ribs) through which spiritual growth takes place. These environments are not competing with one another; rather, they complement one another. Each contributes something important that the others cannot fully provide. Four of these environments are particularly significant: the pulpit, teaching ministries, small groups, and personal mentoring.

The Pulpit

The pulpit plays an indispensable role in discipleship because faithful preaching forms people spiritually. Through the regular proclamation of God's Word, believers are exposed to biblical truth, instructed in sound doctrine, confronted with sin, reminded of the gospel, directed toward Christ, and called to faithful obedience. Week after week, preaching helps shape the worldview, convictions, priorities, and affections of God's people.

There is therefore a vital work of discipleship taking place whenever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed to the gathered church. The pulpit teaches believers

who God is, who they are, what God has accomplished through Christ, how they are called to live, and how they should understand the world around them. Over time, faithful biblical preaching contributes significantly to the formation of mature Christians.

At the same time, the pulpit cannot accomplish everything that discipleship requires. A pastor may faithfully proclaim God's Word to hundreds or even thousands of people, but he cannot personally apply every sermon to the circumstances of every individual in the congregation. He can explain biblical truth clearly and provide meaningful application, but a large-group setting necessarily limits the degree of personal interaction that can occur. The pulpit provides essential biblical proclamation, but discipleship requires additional environments in which biblical truth can be understood and applied more personally.

Teaching Ministries

Teaching ministries provide another important layer in the discipleship process. Sunday school classes, Adult Bible Fellowships, seminars, workshops, institutes, and other structured teaching settings allow believers to explore biblical truth in greater depth. These environments provide opportunities for more systematic instruction, interaction, questions, theological development, and focused study.

In these settings, the church can identify important truths that every believer should understand and provide the necessary time and structure to teach those truths carefully. A sermon may introduce an important doctrine, while a classroom environment can explore that doctrine more comprehensively. A sermon may address a biblical theme broadly, while a teaching environment can provide the opportunity to examine supporting passages, answer questions, and develop a more complete understanding.

These environments are particularly valuable for establishing believers in the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. They provide opportunities to teach biblical theology, systematic theology, church history, Christian living, apologetics, biblical interpretation, and other subjects that help Christians develop a mature and well-rounded understanding of Scripture.

Yet teaching environments also have limitations. A teacher may know the names of those in the room and interact with them regularly, while still knowing relatively little about their personal lives. He may not know the specific struggles taking place in their marriages. He may be unaware of the temptation someone is battling privately. He may not know the fears, disappointments, doubts, or spiritual weaknesses with which individuals are wrestling.

Teaching environments help believers understand biblical truth more deeply, but discipleship must eventually move beyond information into relationships.

Small Groups

Small groups provide an environment in which discipleship becomes increasingly relational. In a smaller setting, people have greater opportunities to know one another personally. They can pray together, share burdens, encourage one another, discuss biblical application, and develop genuine Christian relationships.

A person can remain relatively anonymous in a congregation of one thousand people. It is much more difficult to remain anonymous in a room of ten. That difference matters. Small groups provide a context in which people begin moving from simply attending the same church to actually sharing life with one another. They create opportunities for believers to discuss how biblical truth applies to their circumstances. They provide settings in which questions can be asked that would probably never be raised in a large gathering. They encourage accountability, mutual care, prayer, fellowship, and the bearing of one another's burdens.

Small groups therefore provide an important bridge between the public teaching ministry of the church and the more personal realities of the Christian life. But even small groups have limitations. A person can participate regularly in a small group and still avoid discussing certain areas of life. Some struggles are too personal to address in a group setting. Some questions require more focused attention. Some patterns of sin, discouragement, or confusion are best addressed through a deeper personal relationship. That brings us to perhaps the most personal environment of discipleship.

Mentoring

Mentoring may take place one-on-one, one-on-two, or within a very small group. Whatever form it takes, mentoring provides an environment in which discipleship becomes deeply personal and intentionally focused. It creates the opportunity for one believer to know another well enough to move beyond general instruction and begin addressing the specific realities of that person's spiritual life.

Within that kind of relationship, questions can be asked that are difficult to address in a larger setting. A mentor can ask about the health of a person's marriage, the condition of his thought life, the consistency of his time in Scripture, or the particular sins and temptations he is currently fighting. There is opportunity to ask what God has been teaching him, where he is struggling spiritually, what fears he may be facing, how he can be prayed for specifically, and what God has revealed through His Word that requires obedience. These

kinds of conversations move discipleship beyond general biblical instruction and bring the truth of Scripture directly into the circumstances of an individual's life.

Personal mentoring allows another believer to know us well enough to recognize patterns in our lives, ask difficult questions, provide encouragement, challenge excuses, celebrate spiritual growth, and walk alongside us through seasons of difficulty. It provides a setting in which biblical truth can be applied not merely to Christians in general, but to a particular Christian facing particular circumstances. In this environment, discipleship becomes not only instructional but relational, accountable, and deeply practical.

This leads to an important distinction: Programs do not make disciples. People make disciples. Programs can certainly serve the work of discipleship. Curriculum can support it, and classes, small groups, Bible studies, and other ministries can provide valuable structures and resources. But ultimately, disciple-making takes place when one Christian intentionally invests in the spiritual growth of another Christian and helps that person follow Jesus Christ more faithfully.

Therefore, the most important question is not simply whether our churches possess discipleship programs. A more searching question is, “Who is intentionally investing in whom?” Who is sitting across the table from another believer and opening the Scriptures with that person? Who is willing to ask the difficult questions and pray consistently for someone else's spiritual growth? Who is helping another Christian understand how the gospel and the truth of Scripture apply to marriage, temptation, suffering, work, family, relationships, and the ordinary circumstances of everyday life? If our answer is simply that we hope these kinds of relationships develop naturally, then they are unlikely to occur with the consistency and intentionality that biblical discipleship requires.

For that reason, the entire church must participate in the disciple-making process. The pulpit establishes biblical truth, teaching environments deepen biblical understanding, small groups cultivate meaningful relationships, and personal mentoring brings biblical truth directly into the details of individual lives. Each environment contributes something important to spiritual formation, and together they provide a more complete approach to developing mature followers of Christ.

When these elements work together, discipleship ceases to be merely another program or activity in the church calendar. It becomes part of the identity and mission of the congregation. The church begins to understand that disciple-making is not simply something it offers; disciple-making is central to what the church has been called to do.

We Need to Practically Implement a Disciple Process in our Churches

When you return home, I would encourage you to gather your pastors, elders, or ministry leaders together. Put five questions on a whiteboard and work through them carefully.

1. What is a Disciple?

Begin with definition. If your leadership team cannot agree on what a disciple is, start there. You cannot develop a disciple-making strategy until you know what you mean by disciple.

2. What Does a Mature Disciple Look Like?

Define the destination. What should this person know? What should this person believe? What should this person practice? What should this person value? What should this person be able to reproduce?

If you cannot describe spiritual maturity, you cannot intentionally move people toward it.

3. What Pathway Moves Someone Toward That Maturity?

Identify the next steps. What happens after conversion? What happens after baptism? Where do foundations occur? Where do believers learn Scripture? Where do they develop relationships? Where do they serve? When are they equipped to make disciples? Make the pathway understandable.

4. Where Do Relationships and Mentoring Happen?

Identify who is investing in whom. Do not merely ask where people attend. Ask where people are known. Where do honesty, vulnerability, accountability, encouragement, correction, and personal biblical application occur?

5. How Do Disciples Become Disciple-Makers?

Build multiplication into the process from the beginning. Do not wait until someone has been saved for twenty years to suggest that he or she might help another Christian grow. Teach new believers from the beginning that following Jesus eventually means helping others follow Jesus.

Those five questions can reshape the discipleship culture of your church.

Conclusion: Moving from Activity to Intentionality

Churches are extraordinarily busy places. We preach sermons, organize ministries, host events, develop programs, train volunteers, prepare lessons, counsel families, care for hurting people, plan calendars, conduct meetings, organize outreach, support missions, and minister to children, students, adults, and families. Much of that activity is necessary, much of it is valuable, and much of it genuinely honors the Lord. Yet there is also a danger that accompanies constant activity: churches rarely drift toward disciple-making; they drift toward activity. Without intentionality, calendars fill, programs multiply, events continue, and ministry remains busy, while the more fundamental question of whether people are becoming mature followers of Jesus Christ can quietly receive far less attention.

Disciple-making requires intentionality. Jesus did not command His church merely to gather people, nor did He call us simply to produce well-attended events, full classrooms, successful programs, or increasingly sophisticated ministries. He commanded us to make disciples. Making disciples means walking with people long enough and intentionally enough that the truth of Scripture begins to reshape who they are. Biblical truth reshapes the way they think, what they value, what they love, how they establish priorities, how they conduct relationships, and how they form habits. It changes the way they respond to temptation, endure suffering, serve others, and understand their mission in the world. Over time, the truth of Scripture becomes increasingly evident in the way they live because they are progressively becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Yet even spiritual maturity is not the end of the process. Eventually, we must help mature believers do for someone else what another believer has done for them. We move intentionally from conversion to maturity, from maturity to ministry, and from ministry to multiplication. That progression changes the way we think about discipleship within the local church. Perhaps the question should not simply be, “Does our church have a discipleship ministry?” Almost every church can point to a program, class, small group, or ministry on the calendar and answer yes. The more important question may be, “Is discipleship the ministry of our church?”

We should be building a culture of discipleship within our churches. Converts become disciples, disciples become disciple-makers, and disciple-making begins to shape the culture of our local church. As that pattern is repeated from believer to believer and from generation to generation, the church faithfully carries out the mission Jesus Christ has entrusted to us.

Resources:**Books:**

Discipleship Today: [Discipleship Today: Applying Biblical Discipleship in Today's Context: Burggraff, Andrew T.: 9781959454038: Amazon.com: Books](#)

Growing in Grace: [Growing in Grace: A Discipleship Manual for New Believers - Teacher's Manual: Burggraff, Dr Andrew T: 9781959454106: Amazon.com: Books](#)

Free Website with a One-on-One Discipleship Curriculum:

[The Growing Disciple — Biblical Resources for Following Christ](#)