How did Discipleship become a Lost Art?

The Strachan Theorem, put forth by the late R. Kenneth Strachan, director of the Latin American Mission organization, proposed that “the successful expansion of any movement is in direct proportion to its ability to mobilize and involve its total membership in constant propagation of its beliefs, its purposes, and its philosophy.”\(^1\) After Jesus issued the command to “make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28, His followers enthusiastically obeyed His challenge. Christianity infiltrated the pagan world of Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. Rapid expansion continued until the third century. Have you ever wondered what caused the disciple-making flame of the first century to burn out? Did you even notice that it did? While there are many factors that have contributed through the years, allow me to offer a few that I find particularly compelling.

The shift from empowering the laity for the work of ministry to a employing a hierarchical structure began with the formation of the Catholic Church. During the third century, institutionalism took over the responsibilities from the discipleship model established in the first century. “From this time onward,” comments Alexandre Faivre, “the layman’s function was to release the priest and Levite from all his material concerns, thus enabling him to devote himself exclusively to the service of the altar, a task that was necessary for everyone’s salvation.”\(^2\) Throughout the second and third centuries, an assembly of presbyters and bishops governed the church. The ministry was stripped from the people and put in the hands of the priests, a hierarchical structure descending from the Pope that is still in effect today.

Believers were immediately emasculated from the expectation of Ephesians 4:11-13 to partner in the ministry with leaders in the church. The vacuum of authority took the wind out of the sails of a multiplication movement that spread rapidly up to this point. For the next thousand years, the church had a monopoly on ministry. The spiritual temperature was so cold during this period that it perfectly fit the name once applied to it because of our lack of historical knowledge about it: the Dark Ages.

Another setback to the disciple-making movement was an over-emphasis on an individual’s experience with the spiritual realm. Gnosticism (knowledge), in the First and Second centuries, along with Montanism (experience) sidetracked many believers. In a response to the intellectualizing trend set forth by the formation of schools in the regions of Alexandria, Syria, Bithynia, and Asia Minor, leaders overemphasized an emotional experience.

An unforeseen result was the minimization of the proclamation of the Word of God. “The leadership and people,” according to Carl Wilson in his helpful book With Christ in the School of Disciple Building, “became preoccupied with the gifts of the Spirit and with emotional experience to the point that the teaching of Scripture and the apostolic traditions were neglected and the preaching and teaching became shallow.” It was time for a grand shift in the spiritual lives of people everywhere, and Martin Luther was exactly the man to bring it about.

A Movement Everyone Could Get Behind
Before giving his life to full time-vocational ministry for the Lord, Luther pursued a Law degree. In 1501, he entered the University of Erfurt, where he excelled in his studies. Toward the end of his studies an event changed his life. As he was traveling, lighting struck next to him causing him to evoke the name he heard often in his home growing up: “Saint Anne! Save me from this lightning. If you save me, I will become a monk.”

Being a man of his word, Martin withdrew from Law school and entered an Augustinian monastery where he applied himself so diligently that he obtained a Doctorate of Theology within a few years. Throughout his life, he never experienced personal peace for his soul. He constantly asked, ‘How can a man find favor with God?’ On a pilgrimage to Rome to answer this question, He almost died on his journey because of a high fever. A monastery took him in and nursed him back to health. An older monk heard of his dilemma and instructed him to read Habakkuk. The Words of Habakkuk 2:4 were like medicine for his troubled soul: “The righteous shall live by faith.”

When he arrived at Rome, he joined the masses climbing the steps on their knees, some even beating themselves with whips with each step. As he made his way up the stairs, the words of Habakkuk rang through his mind. He put the whip down and returned to Wittenberg a new man. This was the turning point of his life. He would soon fire a shot across the bow of Christianity with his nailing of the 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The Reformation had begun.

Martin Luther changed Christendom with a reaffirmation of the priesthood of all believers. It was his belief that every believer, regardless of race, culture, creed, maturity level, or education should be able to read the Bible for themselves. Once they could, they didn't have to rely on a bishop, priest, or the Pope to feed them the Word any longer. In essence, power shifted from the Pope to the people. The chasm between the clergy and the laity was bridged.

Listen to what I am about to say: I believe a return to discipleship in the church is the Reformation of the 21st Century.

How can I say this?

Discipleship empowers every believer filled with the Holy Spirit to take ownership of their faith, some for the first time. Any person, regardless of gender, race, color, creed, or maturity level, can obey the command to make disciples. Anyone, anywhere can do it.

Modern Misconceptions of Disciple-making

When Southern Baptists hear the words “training union,” memories of the late nineteen sixties come to mind. During that time, “The normal Baptist formation tools were finding it difficult to succeed;” comments Molly T. Marshall, “Sunday School, Training Union and the missionary organizations were all scrambling for their existence and seeking new ways of forming disciples.” The negatives of the training offset the positives by reducing discipleship to a class, a program, and a time slot. To this day, many training union participants have a misunderstanding of what discipleship really is.
Campus Crusade

These shortcomings birthed new approaches in the arena of discipleship. Two organizations emerged as frontrunners during the middle of the twentieth century: the Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ, which was begun by Bill Bright.

Bill Bright envisioned a ministry reaching the lost through evangelistic events with the sole desire to disciple those responding to the message of Christ. Campus Crusade may have been the first to start, dating back to 1947. Early successes can be attributed to the partnerships with Dan Fuller and Billy Graham. The ministry was known as an “aggressively evangelistic movement, which places a strong, wholesome emphasis on the living Christ, the authority of the Scriptures, the importance of the Church, personal and group evangelism, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the adventure of Christian discipleship.” The impact of which is still seen on college campuses around the world today.

Navigators

In the early fifties, Navigators was birthed in Colorado Springs, with the primary aim to make disciples. According to one of their authors, “The Navigators is an international, interdenominational, Christian organization. Jesus Christ gave His followers a Great Commission in Matt. 28:19, ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.’ The primary aim of the Navigators is to help fulfill that commission by making disciples and developing disciple makers in every nation.” In 1976 Bright wrote the forward to a foundational work on discipleship entitled, A Guidebook to Discipleship. He commented, “Campus Crusade for Christ International believes that the awakening of the first century will be duplicated in our time through the Church, the Body of Christ, under the direction and control of the Holy Spirit, as Christians win people to Christ, build them in the faith, and send them out into a ministry of discipleship. Though our ministry is best known as a ministry that emphasizes evangelism, far more emphasis is placed on discipleship.” Leading men and women to Christ is important, but evangelism without discipleship produces unequipped, immature believers.

Some would put the burden on seminaries to equip men and women for future ministry. However, creating a disciple-making movement requires more than classroom lectures or passed proficiency tests. Don't get me wrong: I am thankful for my seminary experience. As a believer one year removed from a drug and alcohol addiction, I left the school with a big-picture view of pastoral ministry. Unfortunately, one class that was not taught, and sorely needed, was disciple-making. Although the concept was discussed every now and again, most students graduated without a comprehensive strategy for making disciples in the local church. One seminary professor lamented, “Graduating seminarians don't seem to know how to minister to people in such a way as to help them really live the Christian life.”

Discipleship has unfortunately been overshadowed by evangelism, even though the two practices are to work in tandem with one another. Evangelism and discipleship are two oars attached to one boat. With only one oar in the water, you will go in a circle. Both oars are necessary to reach your destination. Both are essential to carrying out the Great Commission.
In other words, the Gospel is received through evangelism and lived out through discipleship. Evangelism without discipleship will end when the evangelist dies. Likewise, discipleship without evangelism will cease when the disciple-maker dies. A friend of mine says, “If our churches are not evangelistic, then our discipleship process has not been holistic.” True disciples make disciples, and disciples cannot be made without evangelism. It is a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” proposition.

Discipleship has been cast aside because the results, compared to evangelistic efforts, are hard to measure. The time investment is long and the work is arduous. “The task of building disciples takes longer, is more demanding, and is harder to publicize and sell. People are more impressed with statistics on evangelism than with those on disciple building. It’s more dramatic to have a baby than to care for a child. But the former is tragic without the later.”

You can’t microwave a disciple. Discipleship is a crockpot recipe. It takes time for spiritual growth to take root.

One of the main issues we face is the vast number of pastors whom have never been discipled. It’s very difficult, if not impossible, to take someone on a journey you haven’t been on. The church is for disciple-making and disciple-making is for the world. It’s time we stop making excuses and start making disciples.

5 Steps for Creating a Disciple-Making Culture

If we fail to plan, we can plan to fail. Here are five steps for creating a disciple-making movement in your context.

1. Pray for God to Change the Hearts of People

If we spent as much time asking God to change peoples hearts as we do trying to get people’s hearts changed toward the things of God, we would see more change. God is the author of every spiritual awakening.

2. Know Where You’re Heading

You can’t change the path you’ve been on, but you can change where you’re heading. Determine where you’re heading and how you will get there. Define what a disciple looks like and develop a strategy for equipping your people. Remember, if you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.

3. Change your Language

Language changes culture. Your people will celebrate whatever you celebrate. Stop celebrating the ABC’s of church success: Attendance, Buildings, and Cash. Change is difficult, especially when things are going well. Mark Devries, in his book Sustainable Youth Ministry, said, “When momentum is strong and energy is high, the last thing most churches are thinking about is changing something.” Discipleship is not just a ministry in the Church. It’s the ministry of the church.
Stop being impressed with successes in ministry that distract you from your goal to make disciples. I challenged our staff a few years ago to apply the **K.I.S.S.** method to every ministry in their department: evaluate everything you do and decide whether to **Keep it, Increase it, Stop it,** and **Start it.** Some of my staff learned the hard lesson that it was harder to eliminate ministries that took away from our mission than to start new ministries. We think long and hard now before engaging in new avenues of ministry.

**4. Stop focusing on Information and start focusing on Transformation**

I posed a question to our congregation one Sunday morning: “Many of you heard my message from last Sunday morning, you then listened to a different message about a different topic during the Sunday School hour, next you heard a different message on Sunday night, followed that up with a totally different message on Wednesday night, and finally, for those who had the time, you attended a Bible study during the week. How many of you can tell me the points from last Sunday’s message?”

No one raised a hand.

We must not equate maturity with knowledge. Dave Browning rightly commented, “I am convinced that the gap holding back most believers is not the gap between what they know and what they don’t know. It’s the gap between what they know and what they’re living…. We are educated beyond our obedience.” Reiteration and reinforcement are as important as or more than transfer of information. A discipleship group offers you an avenue for implementation and application of spiritual truth.

**5. We Created a Discipleship Pathway for Spiritual Growth**

Most believers are incapable of connecting the dots for spiritual growth in their life. Because they have watched idly from the pews, it will take some time before they get off the bench and into the game. This is why people need a pathway to walk on. The Discipleship Pathway we use at Brainerd Baptist is based on Jesus’ discipling relationships in the gospels. (You can download the Disciplemaking Pathway at www.replicateministries.org.) It is a fourfold strategy for exponential growth: Congregation (large gathering), Community (life groups), Core (d-groups), and close (relationship with God).

In our first membership matters class that we offered, a college student raised her hand to ask a question at the end of the 4 hour presentation. She said, “Pastor, I am so excited about what’s going on at Brainerd. We are involved in so many things. Our church has so much to offer. However, I have a problem. I don’t know where to start.”

*We have found that when people don’t know what to do, they don’t do anything at all, or they do everything.*

*When people have too many options, they don’t do anything at all, either.*
By offering the Disciplemaking Pathway to our people, they can assess where they are in the journey and take the next step. I’m constantly repeating from the pulpit, “What step are you on in the pathway? Now take the next one.”
1Evangelism in Depth (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1961), 25.


3Nate Mazzuca, Avery Noble, Those Who Came Before Us
https://books.google.com/books?id=rtfsBQAACAAQBAJ&pg=PT54&lpg=PT54&dq=Saint+Anne!+Save+me+from+this+lightning.+If+you+save+me,+I+will+b+come+a+monk.”&source=bl&ots=je-lreKGim&sig=AGlztBZgpld6pkiM6278QZ29cM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=A0MPVdz8F8aUNfTQgtAC&ved=0CDwQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=Saint%20Anne%20Save%20me%20from%20this%20lightning.%20If%20you%20save%20me%2C%20I%20will%20become%20a%20monk.”&f=false [Internet] (accessed 18 March 2015).


5Bill Bright, Revolution Now (San Bernadino: Campus Crusade For Christ, 1970), 195.

4Ibid., 197. Bright is referring to the Universal Church.

5Francis Cosgrove, Essentials Of New Life (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978), i.


7Carl Wilson, With Christ in the School of Disciple Building (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 37.

8Twitter, 9:27 AM. (Accessed 19 Jan 2013), @derwinlgray.

9Wilson, 218.