

Hello Pastors/Leaders:

I started a series of articles over a year and a half ago on the subject of church health/revitalization. You can read these articles on our webpage at:

<https://www.nwibaptist.com/resources>. The newest article will be on *Discipleship and Revitalization*.

Although there have been recent trends within SBC churches of improvement in the understanding and practice of discipleship, there yet remains a discipleship deficit in many of our churches. The decline of our churches can be directly tied to a lack of Biblical discipleship among our members. Biblically, discipleship is multifaceted. However, in many of our churches, and in the thinking of too many of our people, discipleship is narrowly focused on informational intake in a classroom setting. And even with that limited view of discipleship, often the quality of that classroom experience is lacking due to an unqualified, and poorly prepared and motivated teacher. However, even with a qualified teacher and solid curriculum, if this is where discipleship ends, it leaves a hole in our discipleship that will inevitably lead to church decline. A discipleship that includes the biblical *rational, relational, and missional* elements are essential to having healthy growing disciples and a revitalized church.

So, in the context of church health and revitalization, how should we approach discipleship? What are some principles and practices that need to be applied as we think about discipleship in our context?

First, clear up the myths of discipleship – There is probably nothing as misunderstood in our churches as the subject of discipleship. As already alluded to, many think discipleship is a class you take or a church program you attend. Learning the content of Scripture through taking a class or being in a small group is important as it aids in the rational aspect of discipleship. However, it is insufficient in and of itself, and can in fact lead to prideful knowledge without practical application. Another myth is that discipleship is something extra or optional to the Christian life. But discipleship is part and parcel of being a Christ-follower. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*: “*Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.*” Discipleship cannot be compartmentalized to Sunday morning Sunday School class nor just the intake of Bible knowledge. Discipleship is a lifestyle that affects all areas of the disciple’s life for all of life.

Second, teach a theology of discipleship – Not only do we need to clear up myths, but we need to make sure that our people have a biblical understanding of what a “disciple” is and what “discipleship” involves. The theological implication is that *all believers are disciples*. Non-discipleship Christianity is a misnomer. The practical implication is that *all believers are on a pathway of discipleship*. Unless we lay the theological groundwork, then diverse unbiblical views will reign and a discipleship strategy for your church cannot be developed.

Third, put the gospel at the center of discipleship – Too often our discipleship has been focused on behavioral modification - external moralistic change instead of inward spiritual transformation. This results in either self-righteous pride because we’ve made the external

changes or condemning guilt because we've not been able to perform. However, it does not result in transformational discipleship. Only when we keep the Gospel at the center - that is, when we abide in, dwell on, and stand in awe of that Christ has done for us, then true spiritual victory will come. Gospel-centered discipleship is an antidote to a moralistic centered discipleship.

Fourth, integrate a “make disciples” culture in your church – Many SBC churches historically had a “make decisions” strategy that emphasized “praying a prayer” but not calling would-be disciples to follow Christ. However, we never see Jesus doing that. He called people to discipleship – to count the cost to follow Him (Lk 9:23; Lk.14:27-28). This was not His call to a deeper level of commitment, but His call to salvation. The Great Commission is all about making disciples, not merely concentrating on counting decisions. In fact, in the Greek text, the only imperative (command) in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) is “make disciples”, not “go” as is commonly understood.

Fifth, connect your evangelism and discipleship – We often separate evangelism from discipleship, but Scripture does not support this false separation. Discipleship refers to the whole process of “disciple making” - from conversion to sanctification; from evangelism to “*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” Evangelism informs discipleship and discipleship informs evangelism. That is, evangelism and discipleship operate more as a cycle – evangelism is undertaken with the goal of discipleship and discipleship should in turn prepare disciples for evangelism.

Sixth, emphasize a holistic view of discipleship – As mentioned earlier, too often discipleship is seen only through the lens of informational transfer, while leaving out the other aspects of discipleship, i.e., lifestyle, application of spiritual disciplines, community (biblical fellowship), service, mission and evangelism. A lack of a holistic view of discipleship leads to incomplete or non-discipleship. Especially emphasize and attempt to incorporate *the community, iron-sharpening-iron relational* aspect of discipleship. Interdependent relationships within the Body of Christ are necessary for growth as a disciple.

Seventh, develop a discipleship strategy for your church - Biblical discipleship and disciple making cannot happen haphazardly or accidentally, or even naturally. Intentionality is required. There must be a plan, a strategy, an approach, as it were, in place or disciple making will not become a lifestyle. Without a full-fledged commitment and a well thought through strategy, disciple making will only be a pipe dream – a fleeting good intention.

Eighth, emphasize reproduction as an essential ingredient in discipleship and incorporate it in the church’s discipleship strategy - Many times our discipleship is not working because we’re locked in a closed system. That is, we’ve reduced spiritual development to an in-house non-threatening experience...we talk to ourselves; we interact about ourselves, and we address issues about us! This reproductive aspect of discipleship is not going to be produced by programs and preaching...they are good and necessary, but they are limited in their effectiveness in producing disciples that reproduce. The life of discipleship is one of reproduction with a relational investment in the world. We are not truly discipled until we’re connected back to the world making disciples.

The danger for our churches is either they will continue with an incomplete and faulty view of discipleship, or they will latch onto “the discipleship movement” somewhat superficially without counting the cost of what it really means to establish a discipleship culture in their congregations. Discipleship is the heart of the Great Commission, so if we’re not striving to make it central in our churches for the glory of God, then we’re severely lacking in being a New Testament church. However, we must understand that discipleship is not some neat package that we can easily implement in our churches like installing software on our computers! No, it is messy, costly, always a work in progress, upsets the status-quo, and requires on-going attention. That is, establishing a disciple-making church is a reorientation of the hearts of the people and the culture, ministry, and direction of the church. But it is not an option if we want to be Great Commission churches!

If you need assistance in designing a discipleship strategy for your church, please contact me. May God grant that the churches of the NWIBA embrace disciple-making with a full-fledged commitment to His ultimate glory!

In His Service,

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