OUR COMMON STRUGGLE

Why We Don't Cultivate Multiplying Discipleship Environments

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SATURATE COACHING

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INTRODUCTION

Have you longed to see the Spirit send new churches, communities, and disciples to new areas of your cities and regions? Like me, did you believe God called you to invest deeply in the leaders who will guide those discipleship environments or those communities on mission across your city?

If you are a leader like that, welcome. This book was written for you. This book will challenge some of your deepest assumptions and idols, and point you to the only One whose vision is larger than your own. It is also my sincere prayer that it will encourage your soul.

If you are a leader beginning this journey and seeking “silver bullets” to make disciples, this was written for you, too. This book could stop you in your tracks and call you to reimagine all your dreams of grandeur. It will empower you to trust what you already know to do and inspire you to prioritize disciple-making environments. And this book will point you to the only “silver bullet”: the message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

If you are an equipper and coach of communities, I pray this book brings you deeper clarity on the target set before you of caring for the leaders you lead. I pray it clears the path toward the deep and transformative possibilities in the gospel. I pray for you as you are given the joy of speaking into the exhaustion, distractions, and lies that steal joy. I hope this book offers good news to you and through you.

I want to invite you into this journey. In chapters one through five we’re going to engage some of the significant heart issues that keep us from leading disciple-making movements. We’re going to set the table with possibilities for what might be going wrong, but then we’re going to focus on us—leaders. Some of it will be hard to read and convicting. But the really good news is that the Good News is enough for you, me, and our churches. In chapters six through seven we’re going to see how the gospel frees us, redeems us, and sends us forward. Lastly, in chapter eight, we’ll help you think through a plan of walking toward the real barriers and difficulties we all face in cultivating a disciple-making environment¹ and point you to helpful next-step resources.

¹ *What is a Disciple Making Environment? by Todd Morr*
In this article, Todd Morr describes the 10 qualities of a disciple making environment we see in Scriptures and asks important questions to help you take next steps. https://saturatetheworld.com/2017/08/29/creating-an-environment-for-discipleship

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CHAPTER ONE

Why We Don’t Cultivate Disciple Making Environments

I was raised in a Catholic European city. My neighborhood was littered with cathedrals. They were statues of the past more than they were pillars of the present. Except for major holidays and the incredible buildings, it was hard to notice anyone around me experiencing the life of the church. I never had a friend who went to mass on any kind of regular basis. I rarely saw anyone pray outside a stadium or off a soccer field. My home country produced popes, yet people barely passed through the doors of its cathedrals to worship God, much less find Him. Neighbors could spend their lives near church buildings and never encounter the Church.

When I moved to the United States, I encountered a similar story with different details. Church buildings towered over highways, radio stations beamed out Christian music over the skies, and billboards and T-shirts confessed the message of Jesus everywhere. And yet, it was difficult to find people praying outside of stadiums or off football fields. People passed through the doors of church buildings every Sunday, but Christ was visibly absent from the lives of most people Monday through Saturday, or even by Sunday afternoon.

I must warn you, however; this is not normal. The Church is more.

The pattern biblically and experientially for much of church history and throughout the world today is of a community of believers in Jesus growing up to maturity in Christ while they share the gospel with neighbors, family members, and co-workers. As those outside the community see and experience the message of the gospel, they understand it. Through the power of the Spirit, those neighbors become Christians, join the community, and continue to grow up in Christ. As all these disciples mature, new communities form both in their city and region, but also others are sent to distant lands. People who didn’t even know the gospel a short time ago are now leading communities and making disciples themselves. And, the pattern continues as more and more encounter Jesus through the gospel and his church.

2 For Biblical evidence see Acts 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13–20. In church history the examples found in the era of the church fathers, Hussites in Bohemia, the Moravians in central Europe, Jesuit missionaries in Asia and South America, and the protestant world missions movement of the 19th century are all clear examples. In modern global Church, look to the movements in South America, China, rural India, and Southeast Asia. This Washington Post article highlights much of the expanding nature of the church outside the Western World: https://wapo.st/1R3bJra?tid=ss_tw-bottom&utm_term=bf7475b658a
The Church is an explosive, sacrificing, and rapidly multiplying movement of disciples. A church that makes disciples and sends them to start new churches in new places is normative in the history of the church, and this remains the nature of the Church globally\(^3\). We often forget the book of Acts is not about the extraordinary lives of a few Christians but about ordinary Christian life. Every local church exists to be a gospel-centered ecosystem where the lost are found, the wounded are healed, and the love of God moves rapidly into the world around it. It’s normal for churches to reach new people with the message of the gospel daily, weekly, and annually. A church that infiltrates every domain of culture and commerce with disciples who make disciples is a normal church. Churches that start churches. Churches that contextually proclaim the gospel are traditional churches in the truest sense. Disciple-making is traditional ecclesiology.

This vision of a movement of people coming to greater faith in the gospel is likely what drew you into church leadership. The image of disciples equipped and making disciples in their families, neighborhoods, and careers spurs us into action. Perhaps, like me, you hoped to cultivate a gospel ecosystem where the growth was spontaneous and spiritually powerful while the Spirit of God worked deeply in the lives of others. You may be wondering: “Why don’t we experience ordinary Christianity in the Western world? Why aren’t we making disciples and seeing those disciples make more disciples? Why don’t we see this kind of normative multiplying movement of disciples in our context and in our country?” There are many reasons we don’t see multiplying movements of disciples.

**Is it Our Lack of Understanding?**

Some have suggested our issue lies in our collective ignorance: we don’t know we’re called to make disciples. This can certainly be the case as many people have come to faith in Jesus with the understanding that all Christ wanted to do was secure for us a place of peace after death. How would we know He’s calling us into a life of learning to follow Him and make Him known? This is, in part, one reason. People just don’t know what the Bible says. However, many do. The great commission of Matthew 28 finds itself on many church websites, pamphlets, and t-shirts. Short-term “mission trips” are at an all-time high\(^4\). Even people who haven’t

\(^3\) As I describe the church this way, I don’t intend to say every local church that “gets it” is exploding in size, but that churches made of disciples who are contextualizing the gospel and proclaiming it are normative; whether that is a church like Citizens in San Francisco or 40 people who are doing an incredible job of speaking the gospel to rich and poor, agnostic and atheist in a difficult place.

\(^4\) Estimated 1.5 million Americans go on mission trips and spend 2 billion dollars annually on these trips according to Dr. Robert Priest, a missiology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in a 2008 article in Missiology journal.
stepped foot in a church know Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbors as themselves. I suspect most Christians know they’re called to tell people about Jesus, care for the poor, and teach others how to follow Jesus. We just don’t.

Is it That We Don’t Know How?
Many of the reasons for our struggle to make disciples are pragmatic. For example, we aren’t using our gifts, talents, and systems the right way. Essentially, our paradigm has been wrong. Or, our staff teams are not freed up to do the right kind of work. Still many of the pragmatic issues have to do with prioritizing, communicating, and managing these types of movements. Many people lack the training. The evangelical church just doesn’t know how to make disciples because we haven’t seen it done in a clear way and no-one taught us to make disciples. They taught us to be attendees, givers, and event volunteers. Therefore, we spend our leadership doing the same.

At least part of the reason we aren’t seeing multiplying movements of disciples is that we don’t know how. Still, I don’t think this is our primary problem. After all, we have conferences, crusades, and camps that focus on this sort of thing. Well-funded organizations produce videos, curriculum, and websites to train the church. Some of the best-selling Christian books of all time are on the topic of disciple-making, and they’re really good. We know that making a disciple requires relationship, reading the Bible, praying, and talking to strangers. In fact, I’ve frequently trained on discipleship in a variety of settings in which I ask people what you have to do to make disciples and people young and old, educated and uneducated, mature and immature, have all been able to make a robust list. We know what we’re called to do and what it takes, we just don’t do it.

Is it Our Lack of Capacity?
Some have also suggested the pace of modern life leaves little margin for disciple-making: we don’t have time. Dual income families are the norm. With parents working feverishly over 60 hours a week, while raising kids, exercising, working on their homes, commuting, and sleeping, where can anyone find time to make disciples outside a weekly worship service? We’re too busy to build relationships, engage community, and learn how to make disciples, much less actually do it! Our busyness is an issue. It’s also misleading. Most Americans spend on average five hours a day entertaining themselves—with their phones, televisions, sporting events, etc. I live in the entertainment capital of the world, Los Angeles. Entertainment is big business and people have plenty of time on their hands to consume incredible
amounts of spectacle whether it’s big-budget films or 30-second videos of cats on Instagram. While our time limitations can be quite real and restrictive and we need to be creative to make space, overall, we aren’t too busy to make disciples; we would rather be busy doing something else.

Is it Our Lack of Leaders?
Still, many pastors I speak with, train, and coach point to their lack of leaders. Their lacking is heard in their prayers: “God, just send us a leader.” Sometimes it’s seen in their next steps, regardless of the topic: “Get more leaders.” Often, after years of waiting, pastors move toward recruitment: “If only we could get some of their leaders to come here, then we could start making disciples!”

We are hungry for leaders. But that’s not our real problem; it exposes it. Our churches don’t face a leadership crisis; what we’re actually facing is a discipleship catastrophe. We can’t recruit leaders because no one is cultivating disciples. While we anxiously wait for God to give us men and women who know the gospel, know how to lead, and who are committed to following Jesus in every area of life, God gives us disciples.

We’ve missed God’s answer to our prayers. I’ve encountered many church planters and pastors angry with God for not delivering leaders. Meanwhile, God answers our constant prayers for more leaders by sending us men and women to disciple! We ask for polished leaders, but God sends us messy disciples. Ironically, Jesus received a similar mess of people to disciple. Jesus didn’t get polished leaders. He was given erratic fisherman, isolated tax collectors, and a zealot. Yet, Jesus thanked God for them and patiently gave three years of his life to these men He called friends. Whether we have 10 people or 10,000, discipling those people is our primary calling.

We’ve skipped the joy of participating in the spiritual formation that brings maturity and cynically waited for the mature to come to us. We do not have mature disciples who can shepherd and lead others because we did not shepherd and lead them. Our churches are not focused on being environments of spiritual growth because we’re focused on being centers of numerical growth. We haven’t taught people, we haven’t demonstrated discipleship for people, and we haven’t walked alongside people. Where are all the leaders? They’re in your church waiting to be discipled to maturity, hungry to know who they are and who their God is. When we disciple our people, we have leaders.
Our Crisis is Our Common Struggle to Believe the Gospel

While all of the obstacles previously listed are real and must be addressed, our common struggle might be us. I’m convinced today’s pastors and churches don’t lack an understanding of the theory of discipleship as much as we lack an undoing of our hearts. We’ve read the Gospels and the book of Acts. We know how Jesus made disciples. We’ve read books and attended seminars. America produces and purchases more books on discipleship than the rest of the Christian world combined. Our discipleship crisis in America isn’t born from a lack of knowledge, practice, capacity, or opportunity. Our crisis exists in our struggle to believe the gospel.

The primary and deep-rooted reason we don’t see an explosion of disciple-making disciples across America and in our churches is us; our hearts, our motivations, our conviction. To see a movement in our country and see a renewal in our churches, we need heart work. We need to apply the gospel to our hearts as it relates to making disciples. We need the gospel to heal our broken hearts.

A thriving discipleship environment only exists because of the gospel. It requires boldness to speak the gospel and to clearly demonstrate what following Jesus looks like. It requires repentance and renewal as leaders and disciples, continually grasping the depths of God’s love. While we could spend volumes describing the mystery of discipleship (and many discipleship masterpieces have been written), our revival famine doesn’t come from a lack of knowledge or skill. Certainly the barriers listed above must be addressed; however, if we begin with “how to do it better” without examining “why we don’t want to” it won’t matter how many trainings or books we have about making disciples.

We aren’t making disciples, and we aren’t creating a discipleship culture because we are distracted, exhausted, and disillusioned. Our hearts have wandered. Our souls are weary. Our spirits are beaten down.

The beginning of a disciple-making culture is you. But it isn’t about working harder, working smarter, and getting more skills. This book proposes we cultivate a discipleship culture by looking into our own hearts, the lies we believe, and the root beliefs that get exposed by our distraction, discouragement, and disillusionment. If we look into our areas of deep exhaustion and discouragement, we can see our
need for the gospel and cry out to the Holy Spirit to care for our souls as the Wonderful Counselor.\(^5\)

\(^5\) This book will not dive into the necessary work we all need to do around emotional and physical health; however, that, too is crucial. We have limits, weaknesses, and wounds that are not belief issues, but deeper. I recommend Emotionally Healthy Leaders by Pete Scazzero as a good place to start.