

Why do churches resist disciple-making?

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(Originally published in Greene & Cotterell, *Let My People Grow*, 2006, 97–108.)

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It's not hard to get people to agree that disciple-making is crucial to the growth of Christians and their church. But it's rare to find a church where whole-life disciple-making is core to their culture, where it shapes everything they do. There are dynamics at work that resist disciple-making. In this chapter, Steve reflects on his experiences in order to understand why.

For reflection

- Where are the main areas of resistance to disciple-making in your situation?
- Is there someone you could encourage for a time on their journey as a disciple of Christ?

Do you remember the 1970s book *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*? I guess some Christians wanted to know the 'secret', a higher spiritual plane or process that would draw them into God's real plan through a door that many had missed. Disciple-making is neither a panacea nor a method. Rather, I understand disciple-making to be a vision, a heartbeat, an emphasis, a process – a longing to see men and women not only become Christians but grow in Christ and reach others. It is the Christ-centred, Spirit-filled desire to see others contribute to the Great Commission in their own context, their workplace, family or church. Disciple-making can be developed within all spiritualities and in every culture in which the local church ministers. While gifting, character and perspective are essential marks of spiritual maturity, so is the heart and practical ability to help others come to Christ and grow. However, I find that churches resist disciple-making. Why is that?

The faith to become disciple-makers

Most Christians have not been personally discipled, nor have they discipled others, and it can be hard to believe God for something we have not experienced. However, that need not be so. 'Daws' Trotman, founder of The Navigators, led the counsellor training for the 1954-5 Billy Graham missions in London and Glasgow. Some 4.5 million people heard the Gospel message, and ninety thousand who responded were invited to come to the front of the meeting to hear a more detailed explanation of how to invite Jesus to be their Lord and Saviour. Each was counselled and prayed with, and their names were passed to churches in their area: 'follow-up' entered the vocabulary of the churches. So much is history.¹

But the story has not yet been told of those who trained the counsellors and began a disciple-making ministry in Britain. Shortly before his death in an accident in 1956, Daws spoke to a staff gathering with a message that is very relevant to our situation.

Let me tell you what I believe the need of the hour is. . . . *I believe it is an army of soldiers, dedicated to Jesus Christ, who believe not only that he is God, but that he can fulfil every promise he has ever made, and that there isn't anything too hard for him. . . .* I believe with all my heart that the reason so many wonderful Christians don't accomplish more in their lives is that they don't believe Jesus meant what He said. . . . The last thing He said was 'All power is given unto me. I'm giving you your orders

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now. Go and teach all nations and see that every created being hears the Word'. . . .
How did that message go? Not by telephone, not by television, but by tell-a-person . . .
everyone had someone else to tell. . . . Maybe the greatest problem today is that we try
to put into printed form that which should go from lip to ear and heart to heart. The
need of the hour, as far as I am concerned, is to believe that God is God and that He is a
lot more interested in getting the job done than you or I.²

I asked two friends of mine why churches resist disciple-making. Their response was
immediate: 'It's hard!' However, if Daws was right, the hardest thing is to trust God.
So this is where we must start.

Jane is a good friend of ours who has gathered a couple of other young mothers to
read the Bible and pray together each week. One woman found personal faith after a
painful divorce, is now happily married and speaks about how her faith affects the
way she treats the children where she works. Another mother was confirmed some
years ago but still finds believing God difficult. A further woman has recently moved
into the area and joined them. Of course, conversation often turns to how difficult
their traditional church is, but under Jane's gentle guidance, they continue to support
the church, to teach the children from the Bible, to apply God's word to their own
challenging situations, and together they make visits to other more vibrant churches.
Be in no doubt, Jane is disciple-making. She has faith that God will use her to help
others grow in faith and in living more fully as a Christian in today's world. Jane is
the most important part of the disciple-making ministry and its basic form.

We need to find ways to encourage the Janes, to resource them, team them up with
others in their area and enable them to see that what they are doing is very valuable in
God's kingdom. And that applies to many ministers who may be disciple-making in
unsympathetic or apathetic churches. However, Jane's is not a disciple-making
church, largely because most of the members don't really believe God calls them to be
disciple-makers. The resources, time and energy of the church are therefore directed
elsewhere - mainly towards keeping their show on the road.

The power of the lowest common denominator

Many other churches, however, readily aspire to see God's kingdom come in their neighbourhood. They attempt to have lively worship on Sunday; the minister and the lay preachers try to be both Bible-based and practical in their teaching; they encourage the house group leaders; they tithe and have committed pastoral visitors; they may have tried Alpha with some success. The key to this church is Christian fellowship and the central messages are the love of God for the sinner, the call to repentance, and encouragement for those who are tempted to fall away from their discipleship. However, this is not a disciple-making church.

Why does it resist disciple-making? After all, there are several faithful 'Janes' here. But others say, 'Let's not go too far!' It would not be right for the house group leaders or the minister to show any kind of favouritism to particular people in the church, as it might leave out others – and some are quite sensitive. Some members have come out of 'heavy-shepherding' churches from the 1970s. Other members have been offended by the way they were asked to move on from running the Lunch Club, the way their difficult child was spoken to in Sunday Club, or the fact that when they were struggling a bit, no one seemed to notice for weeks that they were not in church. So of course, this church believes in making disciples and in spiritual growth, but only so long as the peace is not disturbed. In fact, this is a lowest common denominator church, organised on the basis of keeping everyone on board, minimising complaints and conflicts. In effect, this church is led by those who might complain.

Accommodated but not strengthened

One day I had to replace a rotten fence at the bottom of our garden. I set in concrete the metal supports for the wooden uprights, and fixed the fence panels, but when the wind blew, the fence fell down because the soil was too soft and the concrete not deep enough. I had to halve the height of the fence to suit the soil. When Paul revisited the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, he *strengthened* the disciples. When he did a circuit of the churches in Syria and southern Turkey, he set out to *strengthen* the churches. When he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, Timothy's job was to *establish* and exhort them in their faith.³ The word used for *strengthen* and *establish* means to fix, to make fast, to set. It was a work done by Paul and Timothy under God.

We know that they took account of the soil conditions. If our ministry is based on avoiding trouble, our house group leaders and our minister will be worn out and the choir mistress will have turned into a virago to survive – all because our new disciples for years past have not been *strengthened*, they have been *accommodated*. They have certainly become Christians, they are born again, but they are not strong in their faith and they will fall over when the wind blows. They have not been taught how to grow.

Furthermore, when Paul wrote to some of the Christians in areas he had visited on those trips, he reminded them that the job of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers ministering in their gifts was to equip the saints for the work of ministry.⁴ If our vision is to establish people in the faith and to equip the saints, we will not be focused on keeping everyone on board, nor will our church members be weary of being told what to do – someone will be walking with them to show them how to live.

Many churches realise this and run courses for potential leaders. Wise churches realise that the issue is not just the constant demand for new leadership but also the need for those who could be valuable ‘number twos’, those who might be gifted administrators or have a social conscience and want to serve as school governors or get into local politics. Their need is Christian maturity, for someone to show them how to be everyday disciples and how to help others become disciples, not just tell them to do it. One of the easiest ways is to run courses such as Alpha or Christianity Explored for those becoming Christians, then Emmaus or 2:7 or one of several other courses available for those needing to grow or for emerging leadership.⁵

But courses are not a comprehensive answer. Becoming a disciple-making church means changing some of the default settings of the church. Church culture is often oriented around weekend and evening activity rather than whole-life Christianity. Churches have a tendency to lock in to the local neighbourhood and pay little attention to the places where their members are living and working throughout the week. And the church often presents spiritual growth as somehow divorced from life in the real world. These limited perspectives shape our approach to disciple-making.

Limited perspectives

If your church believes God's promises and is determined to see Christians grow, what else could prevent it from being an effective disciple-making church? A predetermined, powerful, but limited theology. Several years ago I was asked to set up visits to ministers of two large, city-centre churches with whom I had good contacts. I was trying to start 2:7, a comprehensive programme designed to help churches with disciple-making.⁶ Both churches understood preaching to be the primary vehicle for evangelism and Christian growth, and both ministers agreed to give me some time. One minister was happy to allow this new programme as an experiment, but the second cancelled the appointment because he was too busy. The meeting never materialised, largely because the church was overwhelmingly confident that preaching was all that was required to win and mature Christians.

The same approach might well exist in a very charismatic church, with a theology that relates purely to the prophetic. It's not that either preaching or the prophetic is right or wrong, but Christians learn in a variety of ways.⁷ If a church determines that only one way of learning is permitted, it will have a ministry to a limited kind of person. It might be very successful at that, but its disciple-making potential will be limited.

Jesus said that we should love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.⁸ The danger of relying on one method of teaching or learning is that followers of Jesus become very skilled at that one method of intake. While heart people learn mainly through experience, and mind people mainly through books or talks, soul people tend to be pragmatic, and hands-on people learn through doing. Of course most of us are comfortable with one means of perception, but we need our other means to be developed. This is particularly true if we want to mature new leaders who can minister to a variety of personalities and into the variety of cultures within our society.

What is true of our style of learning is also true of our preferred means of intake: some love a large meeting, others only flourish in a small group. However, we become rounded disciples if we can learn the benefits of learning and teaching in the large group, the small group and one-to-one mentoring. Many large churches excel in large and small groups, but the mentoring is often ignored. This is a pity, for it is here that personal care, application, accountability and learning reach their target. Jesus

understood this. He preached to crowds and encouraged or challenged the small group of disciples, but was able to give very specific input to individuals. Adopting these methods as part of an intentional disciple-making strategy will grow a variety of disciples in a whole range of situations. This is important in any size of church, whatever its spirituality.

But limited perspectives can also apply to other areas of our theology. Our understanding of who God is, who we are as human beings, our identity in Christ, our grasp of the comprehensive scope of God's salvation and of his plans and purposes for humanity and for the created world – all these will shape our picture of what a disciple of Christ looks like. Churches can be ineffective in their disciple-making because they have a limited perspective on what it means to be a 'whole-life' disciple-making community.

Focused, but missing the target?

This is the hardest part of disciple-making: you know that you want to see mature disciples among your young people, in the family life stage and in the third age, the active retired. You know that ministering to young professionals is different from ministering to those with manual jobs. Your heart is to grow disciples among them all, but it just doesn't seem to happen. The new word on the block is 'intentional' disciple-making.⁹ The concept is the same difficult one as has always existed: under God, you get what you aim for, and if you aim for nothing, that's what you get.

The key to multiplying disciples is to aim for a few, high-quality relationships. Jesus taught crowds, but he ministered deeply to the twelve and, some would argue, he invested even more in Peter, James and John. Paul planted churches, preached to crowds and formed travelling teams. But he seemed to have a special place for Timothy, and we have two letters written to this young pastor. The advice he gave to his protégé was to find FAT people to invest in: Faithful, Available and Teachable. Paul wrote, 'What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.'¹⁰ It was vital for Timothy to pick very carefully those who were already *faithful* with the resources they had; those who were *available* to teach others, whether individually or in groups; and those

who were *teachable*. There are four spiritual generations in this verse, and Paul would finish his disciple-making job when he saw the fourth generation. But he would only see the fourth generation if Timothy invested in FAT people.

Much of my problem is that I want to help everyone who seems to want to learn. What I need to do is to find those who really want to learn: who are prepared to pay the price of focusing their efforts, of learning the deep character lessons required for maturing in Christ and helping others to grow. Then I need to start them teaching others. Always train the next generation to teach others.

Conclusion

Why do churches resist disciple-making? Because we don't believe that God wants us to be disciple-makers; because we are satisfied to see Christians learn merely to survive rather than truly grow; because we want to please many people in our churches; because our limited theologies describe too narrow a picture of what we're aiming for; and because we are not intentional in our disciple-making. To turn these factors around needs a change of perspective, a change of prayer and a change of purpose.

Hannah prayed, 'O Lord of Hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child . . .'¹¹ Hannah desired a physical son, but it was clear that Samuel was also a spiritual son. The apostle Paul also spoke of the need for spiritual children,¹² and whatever our circumstances or spirituality it is very possible for each of us to have father/son or mother/daughter relationships in the Lord, relationships that will reproduce.

It matters that churches are resistant to disciple-making. But it also matters whether you and I are listening to what God wants us to do and to be. The truth is, he wants me to be concerned about the things I can influence, such as my heart and mind devotion to his love and glory, the quality of my teaching and learning, and the choice of those in whom I am to invest my life (not merely those with whom I am to spend my time). In short, I need to have an intentional disciple-making ministry. I can do

that with one or two individuals, and as a church leader I can structure the church groups to that end, investing in FAT leaders and workers who are going to make that significant difference in the lives of others. I need to model what I'm passionate about. It might not be the full story on disciple-making, but it can certainly move us towards becoming a disciple-making community while we start to tackle the very real areas of resistance within our churches that I've described.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Frank Colquhoun, *Harringay Story* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1955), William Martin, *A Prophet with Honour: the Billy Graham Story* (Hutchinson, 1992) for an excellent account of the Harringay Crusade, and Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (HarperCollins, 1997).
- 2 Dawson E. Trotman, *Great is Thy Faithfulness* (The Navigators, 1957). See also Betty Skinner, *Daws: A Man who Trusted God* (Zondervan, 1974).
- 3 Acts 14:22; 15:41; 1 Thes. 3:2.
- 4 Eph. 4:11-12. See also Chapters 3: Ephesians 4 ministries and spiritual formation, and Chapter 9: What are leaders for?
- 5 See www.alphacourse.org or www.christianityexplored.com for reviews of some of the main courses available.
- 6 <http://navigators.co.uk/church/2-7-info.php>
- 7 See Chapter 13 on adult learning and Chapter 14 on this subject from an emerging church perspective.
- 8 Mk. 12:30.
- 9 See Chapter 16: Experiments in twenty-first-century disciple-making.
- 10 2 Tim. 2:2.
- 11 1 Sam. 1:11.
- 12 See, for example, 1 Cor. 4:14-16.

Further reading

Collinson, Sylvia Wilkey, *The Significance of Jesus' Educational Methods for Today's Church* (Paternoster, 2004)

Graham, Billy, *Just As I Am* (HarperCollins, 1997)

Skinner, B., *With Integrity of Heart and with Skilful Hand* (The Navigators, 1998)

Wright, Walter C., *Mentoring: the Promise of Relational Leadership* (Paternoster, 2004)