



# GROWING TRUE DISCIPLES

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*New Strategies for Producing  
Genuine Followers of Christ*

GEORGE BARNA

President, Barna Research Group, Ltd.



# HOW YOUR CHURCH CAN MORE EFFECTIVELY FULFILL CHRIST'S COMMAND TO "GO...AND MAKE DISCIPLES."

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*"My study of discipleship in America has been eye-opening. Almost every church in our country has some type of discipleship program or set of activities, but stunningly few churches have a church of disciples."* —GEORGE BARNA

Christ's command to the church is clear: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." It is in building disciples—helping others embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, mature in Him, and then lead others to do the same—that the kingdom grows. And when the kingdom grows, churches do too.

In *Growing True Disciples*, respected author and researcher George Barna helps pastors and leaders assess how well their churches are fulfilling their role as disciplemakers. And he reveals models and examples that will equip churches to dramatically increase their effectiveness.

As a result, your church can begin to see more involved members who want to live out their faith in submission to God and joyfully share their resources to fulfill Christ's commission.

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## FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS

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*Jesus is seeking people who are  
absolutely serious about becoming  
new creations in Him.*

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In the original biblical texts, the term used for *disciple* refers to someone who is a learner or follower who serves as an apprentice under the tutelage of a master. The apostles are great examples of this relationship between a student and master: They followed Jesus, the master teacher and model of the Christian faith, learning from His words and deeds and growing through the practical, hands-on training He facilitated. Discipleship connotes that you are being prepared for a particular lifestyle more than for a specialized occupation.

We might define discipleship as *becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ*. It is about the intentional training of people who voluntarily submit to the lordship of Christ and who want to become imitators of Him in every thought, word, and



deed. On the basis of teaching, training, experiences, relationships, and accountability, a disciple becomes transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship, in other words, is about being and reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ.

I believe the intensity conveyed by the word *zealot* is important for us to associate with discipleship. Most Christians lack a true understanding of the context within which Jesus' disciples were developed. As a result, we tend to minimize the investment required to be a follower of Jesus Christ. When we hear that the apostles were followers of Jesus, the image that comes to mind is of people who tagged along after the Lord on His walks through the hot, dusty towns of Judea. The followers were there to listen, to watch, and to be amazed at what the Son of God did in their presence.

#### FOLLOWING JESUS

You and I are "followers" of many different people, organizations, activities, and ideas. For instance, I "follow" the New York Yankees. When they win a game I'm happy for a few seconds, and then I get on with my life. When the Yankees lose a game I'm disappointed for a few seconds, and then I get on with my life. I am not a Yankee zealot—a person who is single-mindedly invested in the day-to-day fortunes of that team.

Contrast that with being a follower of Jesus, especially with what it meant to be in the elite group of twelve. Each of the twelve

disciples abandoned his profession. Each lived a minimalist lifestyle, carrying few possessions and having no enduring sense of residential stability. The disciples learned new principles constantly and were expected to apply those principles on demand. Although all they tried to do was help people, they suffered persecution because their Teacher and His ways were so radical and threatening to some of society's powerbrokers. Their training period was for an unspecified duration, but it lasted in excess of two years before being "prematurely" curtailed. There were no textbooks on which they could rely, so they had to be constantly alert and retain all of the information and insights gleaned during their training stage. In short, they had no life apart from what they were being trained to do. Being a follower of Jesus Christ was an all-consuming obsession.

Unfortunately, the twenty-first-century church has many "followers" of Christ in the sense that I follow the Yankees: We dabble in Christianity. That's not what Jesus had in mind when He called us to be His disciples. He is seeking people who are absolutely serious about becoming new creations in Him—individuals who are fanatics, zealots, mesmerized, passionate about the cause, completely devoted to mimicking their model down to the last nuance.

*The twenty-first-century church has many "followers" of Christ in the sense that I follow the Yankees.*

Discipleship is not a program. It is not a ministry. It is a life-long commitment to a lifestyle.



## HOW IMPORTANT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

My study of discipleship in America has been eye-opening. Almost every church in our country has some type of discipleship program or set of activities, but stunningly few churches have a church of disciples. Maybe that's because for many Christians today, including Christian leaders, discipleship is not terribly important. If we can get people to attend worship services, pay for the church's buildings and salaries, and muster positive, loving attitudes toward one another and toward the world, we often feel that's good enough. But what does the Bible have to say about the significance of discipleship?

Plenty.

We might start with a brief review of key passages regarding the nature of discipleship. The following are six biblically based insights into the importance of discipleship and corresponding Scripture references for further study.

### *1. Disciples Must Be Assured of Their Salvation by Grace Alone*

Embracing the free gift of salvation made available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ initiates our journey as a disciple of Christ. Without the relationship made possible by the acceptance of His gift, a person cannot progress as a disciple; rejection of the cross is an insurmountable obstacle to being a committed follower of Jesus. All human beings are invited to become true disciples of the Lord, but to get into the training program, we must confess our sins and accept Christ as our Savior. Until that score is settled, complete devotion to Christ is impossible.

Scriptures regarding salvation and its relationship to discipleship include Luke 13:1-5, 22-30; 24:46-47; John 3:16-21; Acts 2:36-39; Romans 3:10-24; Galatians 3:1-5; Ephesians 1:13-14; 2:4-10; Titus 3:4-7.

### *2. Disciples Must Learn and Understand the Principles of the Christian Life*

If we are to truly own and then give away our faith, we must have a deep and complete comprehension of that faith. We live in accordance with what we know; we can give only what we ourselves possess. Therefore, it is imperative that anyone who wishes to be a disciple commit to gaining insight into the nature and substance of the Christian faith and work toward a total integration of the principles of that faith in his or her life. You cannot pass that faith on to others if you are not living it...and you cannot live it if you do not understand it.

The importance of learning and understanding Christianity is exemplified in Matthew 6:33; Luke 14:25-35; Philippians 4:8-9; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 5:11-6:3; James 1:5.

### *3. Disciples Must Obey God's Laws and Commands*

Professing allegiance to a cause is one thing; proving your allegiance through actions that are consistent with the core beliefs and practices of the cause is something else. To be a true disciple does not require perfection, for if it did Christianity would not exist today. True discipleship does, however, demand that an individual constantly strive to live in harmony with God's laws and commands.



It is not enough just to know those admonitions; a disciple is devoted to carrying them out consistently and wholeheartedly. The result is a lifestyle that is distinguishable from the norm: vision, values, goals, relationships, and behavior that are different from the established patterns and accepted norms.

See Luke 10:25-28; Acts 5:29; Galatians 5:16-24; Ephesians 4:20-5:21; Colossians 3:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; James 1:22-25; 1 John 3:16-24.

#### *4. Disciples Must Represent God in the World*

Followers of Jesus Christ are not given the option of telling people, "Do as I say, not as I do." Our lives must reflect the ways of God. But even more than that, we are to be God's ambassadors in the world. We are not called to retreat or to live in isolation, but to be light in the darkness—which requires being in the midst of that darkness. We are to be alert to opportunities to represent God in ways that honor Him. And the Great Commission is clear that we are to pursue the world rather than wait for it to pursue us.

See Matthew 10:16; 28:17-20; Mark 5:18-19; John 17:14-18; Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; 1 John 2:15-17.

#### *5. Disciples Must Serve Other People*

The purpose of discipleship is to help Christians become transformed individuals who imitate Christ daily. Jesus' life was about selfless love of others—a life devoted to serving people. Our objective is to help one another become prepared to understand and

address people's needs with the same love, sensitivity, and skill demonstrated by Jesus during His earthly ministry. Discipleship is servanthood; Jesus Himself taught that it is only through serving that one becomes a master.

See Matthew 16:24-28; 20:25-28; Luke 9:1-6; 10:30-37; Acts 6:1-3; Ephesians 2:10; 4:11-12; Philippians 2:1-4; Hebrews 13:16; James 2:14-24.

#### *6. Disciples Must Reproduce Themselves in Christ*

The end goal of disciples is both personal and corporate. The personal goal is to live a life worthy of the name *Christian*. The corporate goal is to introduce other people to Jesus, help them to accept Him as their Savior, and enable them to live the life worthy of someone known as a Christian. The Great Commission is not primarily about evangelism, it is about discipleship: "Therefore go and make *disciples* of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added). An individual who does not reproduce himself in Christ is not truly a disciple since he does not exhibit the selfless love of the Master.

The command for disciples to reproduce themselves is found in Matthew 28:19. You can also find it in John 15:8. Other relevant passages include Matthew 9:35-38; Acts 4:1-11; 5:42; 13:47.

#### DISCIPLE MAKING IS NOT OPTIONAL

The viability of the Christian faith, it turns out, is intimately related to engagement in discipleship. Jesus did not spend three years modeling the discipleship process because He wasn't sure how



else to end His time on earth. The writers of Scripture did not capture Jesus' words on the meaning of discipleship and the related efforts of the apostles for lack of creative ideas. The apostle Paul did not journey back and forth between the churches he'd started simply to gain frequent-walker miles.

The strength and influence of the church is wholly dependent upon its commitment to true discipleship. Producing transformed lives, and seeing those lives reproduced in others, is a core challenge to believers and to the local church.

#### LIVING EXAMPLES OF DISCIPLESHIP

Just to make sure we do not miss the significance of discipleship as a lifestyle, the New Testament is crammed with portraits of believers engaged in personal discipleship. The process involves two complementary components: (1) becoming a committed, knowledgeable, practicing follower of Jesus and (2) instilling that same passion and capacity in others. Consider some of the biblical examples provided for us to follow.

##### *Jesus Christ*

Jesus began His public ministry by recruiting the twelve men who became known as the disciples. He spent the remainder of His time on earth pouring into them the key lessons required to understand life. His objective was to prepare them to carry on His mission in His (physical) absence. Notice how He approached

discipling His followers: teaching, modeling, exhorting, encouraging. We won't do any better than to follow this process.

*The Great Commission is not primarily about evangelism, it is about discipleship.*

##### *Paul*

Nobody imitated Jesus' model better than Paul did. And Paul's imitation of Christ is incredibly significant because he shows us that it can be done! After being saved and then disciplined, he launched into a time of powerful, effective ministry. Paul demonstrates the courage required to boldly represent Christ, the importance of mentoring others, and how indispensable theological knowledge and common sense are in working both inside and outside of the church.

##### *John the Baptist*

Although we tend to think of him as a quirky iconoclast, we mustn't lose sight of John's enviable certainty and single-mindedness about his task. Before it was fashionable to be a follower of Jesus—largely because He had not yet emerged as the incarnate Son of God—John was dedicated to pointing people toward God and preparing them for the One who was to come. He was so influential that Herod beheaded him. He was so committed that Jesus went out of His way to be baptized by him. And he was so exemplary that his life story is still told to this day.



## THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

The first church is described for us in the book of Acts. There may be no better—and certainly no more succinct—picture of a true church than that provided in Acts 2 (note especially verses 42-47). This account is an applied definition of discipleship: the followers of Christ engaged in worshiping, learning, relating, sharing, serving, evangelizing, and praying. The result was numerical growth, cultural influence, and the glorification of God. Their commitment exacted a price—many were persecuted and killed for their faith—but their devotion to Christ resulted in the spread of a dynamic faith that has lasted more than two thousand years regardless of countless political, geographic, sociological, and spiritual roadblocks along the way.

What we see in these examples are people who are committed to both *being* disciples and *producing* disciples of Christ—doing and facilitating. They embrace the principles Jesus taught of obeying God's commands, loving people, expressing gratitude to God through service, strategically training new followers, holding one another accountable, and working in cooperation to achieve the ends of the kingdom. Personal attitudes and behaviors are thereby changed to conform to the dictates of God.

If you want to get excited about discipleship, read the book of Acts. It's hard to read the story of Stephen and not want to jump out of your seat and find someone to mentor. The simplicity and boldness displayed by Peter is inspiring—and given our knowledge of Peter before Pentecost, his story encourages us to believe that we,

too, can overcome our deficiencies to serve the Lord with honor and impact. And following Paul on his travels throughout Asia Minor gets you both exhausted and energized. How could one man do so much in such a short period of time?

These are the stories of zealots for Christ! Because we have a glimpse into their lives before they became revered saints, we know that they started off no better than we are. Their stories have become legendary because of their passion for the cause of Christ. Absolutely nothing was more important to them than being disciples of Jesus Christ—and they allowed nothing to stand in the way of fulfilling that glorious opportunity.

## THE MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

The marks of a true disciple, then, are simple:

- Disciples experience a changed future through their acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior and of the Christian faith as their defining philosophy of life.
- Disciples undergo a changed lifestyle that is manifested through Christ-oriented values, goals, perspectives, activities, and relationships.
- Disciples mature into a changed worldview, attributable to a deeper comprehension of the true meaning and impact




of Christianity. Truth becomes an entirely God-driven reality to a disciple. Pursuing the truths of God becomes the disciple's lifelong quest.

Take a good look at your life. Are you certain and excited about your eternal destiny as a result of your relationship with Christ? Is your lifestyle one that you could confidently display to God without fear of rebuke? Are you sufficiently conversant in the principles and purposes of your faith that give you meaning, purpose, hope, and parameters?

How about your ministry to others? Do you exploit available opportunities to share your faith in Christ with those who are not believers? Are you committed to assisting any believers in pursuing personal spiritual development?

If you wonder how you're doing as a disciple—and as a disciple maker—let me encourage you to thoughtfully consider ten simple questions:

1. Are you certain that your eternal salvation has been determined by your confession of sins and your acceptance of Christ's gift of forgiveness?
2. Do you consistently obey Jesus' teachings?
3. Do you always love other people in practical ways, especially fellow followers of Christ? 

4. Have you put the attractions and distractions of this world in their proper place and focused on knowing, loving, and serving God?
5. Do you carry the burdens of following Jesus with joy?
6. Do you live in such a way as to show others what the Christian life looks like?
7. Do you relate to other Christians consistently, in a spiritual setting and for spiritual purposes?
8. Are you sharing your faith in Christ with those who have not embraced Him as their Savior?
9. Are you helping other believers to grow spiritually?
10. Do you consistently seek guidance from God in all you do?

*When you are a true disciple of Jesus Christ, you will bear fruit worthy of a follower of the risen Lord.*

The essence of these questions is simple: When you are a true disciple of Jesus Christ, you will bear fruit worthy of a follower of the risen Lord. **There is no single test to definitively ascertain**



whether you are a true disciple, but God has placed His Holy Spirit within you to enable you to discern such things. Questions such as these are mere reminders of the importance of certain types of efforts at growing and serving. None of us would score a perfect ten every moment of every day; we all fall short sometimes. But as Paul instructed us, we must keep our eyes focused on the goal.

It is interesting to notice the divergent characters of Jesus' disciples. Discipleship is about becoming devoted and mature followers of Jesus, but apparently it is not about becoming clones. Christianity does not require us to become bland, uniform, one-dimensional beings. We are able to maintain the idiosyncrasies and unique qualities God bred into us. All God wants to do is transform our hearts from focusing on self and the world to focusing exclusively on Him. Once that transition is underway, He provides ways to use our distinctive qualities for His purposes.

Also note that the disciples who started that global spiritual revolution in Jerusalem were not building the church solely on the basis of accumulated knowledge. We must not forget that discipleship is more than learning the substance of the Bible. Stephen was obviously well schooled in church history and was able to effectively articulate the story of the church, but we also know that, before he was martyred, he was one of the leaders of the outreach to the needy. Paul was one of the world's great debaters, but we also read about his concern for the poor, the widowed, and the sick. Jesus modeled this balance of knowledge and application by dividing His time between teaching and demonstrating love in action—

healing, feeding, consoling, encouraging. Discipleship is an artful blend of what we know and what we do.

### BUILDING A DISCIPLING CHURCH

Discipleship cannot occur in a vacuum; it is most effectively accomplished in cooperation with other followers of the Lord. The significance of the local church as a gathering of believers is inescapable: Without the support of a body of like-minded followers, we will not reach our potential as servants of God.

*Churches that are most effective in discipleship have a philosophy of ministry that places daily spiritual growth at the core of the ministry.*

My studies of thousands of churches across the country have convinced me that discipleship does not happen simply because a church exists. It occurs when there is an intentional and strategic thrust to facilitate spiritual maturity. Specifically, the local church must have a philosophy of ministry that emphasizes the significance of discipleship and promotes a process for facilitating such maturity. The church must provide relational opportunities for congregants, matching those who need to grow with individuals and ministries that facilitate growth. Because serving people is such a crucial dimension of spiritual maturity, churches help people grow by giving them opportunities to meet the needs of others. One of the great—and underutilized—benefits of the church



is to provide a means of accountability for those who seek to grow in Christ.

To create a discipling church takes more than having a Sunday school, small groups, or good expository preaching. As we will discuss in a subsequent chapter, churches that are most effective in discipleship have learned what is required among their people: a philosophy of ministry that places daily spiritual growth at the core of the ministry. Programs alone won't get the job done. Knowing what you're striving to produce, having a philosophy that supports that outcome, implementing a plan to accomplish the goal, and evaluating the sufficiency of the outcomes is crucial to successful discipleship. Just as each believer's life is examined to see if it produces fruit, so must each church evaluate its ministry to determine the quantity and quality of the fruit it is producing.

But it all starts with a clear understanding of what we're seeking to produce: people committed to becoming and to reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ.