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The Foundation of a Disciplemaking Culture

BUILDING A CORE TEAM
TO AWAKEN A MOVEMENT

JUSTIN G. GRAVITT



CHRISTLIKE DISCIPLESHIP

Time and time again I have benefited from reading or listening to what Justin has to say about making disciples. He not only thinks deeply on this subject but also provides many practical insights and applications for those who want to be obedient to the great commission.

CHRIS KOVAC, pastor of outreach ministries, West Highland Church

A short but powerful little book that's full of wisdom and practical advice from real-life practitioners in the church trying to make disciples. . . . Very useful for churches trying to make the paradigm shift from church growth (seeker-sensitive nonsense) to obeying Jesus by fulfilling the great commission.

BRETT RICLEY, associate pastor of discipleship and adult ministries at The Mission Church



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Preface

Now more than ever, information is cheap. The internet is a warehouse of information that robots can now deliver with human-like interaction. Such effortless knowledge (artificial intelligence) tempts us to believe that knowing is an adequate stand-in for becoming. The problem is that there is a big gap between information and transformation.

For centuries Christian maturity has been defined (in large part) by knowing. For years, I relied on books to grant me the feeling of learning and growth; but without application, my voracious reading was really just entertainment. I was educated by books, but I wasn't deeply formed by them.

While books by themselves can't form us into disciples, disciplemaking relationships invite us into a space where another Christ-follower can see us—weaknesses and all—and speak into who we can become as we follow the King.

In that respect, using a book to learn any aspect of disciplemaking is a bit of an oxymoron. Jesus' way of making disciples presupposes incarnation: presence that is face-to-face and

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life-on-life. In discipling, nothing can ever replace really seeing another person.

No book, no matter how well written, can ever do that.

So why write about this topic? Why do we need another book adding to the overwhelming reams of written words already out there?

It's still true that while the fields are ripe for harvest, "the laborers are few."¹ If there were enough people actively engaged in making disciples, then we'd each have someone with the vision, heart, and skill to walk alongside us as we learn how to make disciples who make disciples. If you have someone like that, lean into that relationship as you read this book together to supplement what you're already doing. If you don't have someone like that, then this book is also for you.

This book is especially aimed at Christian leaders, including pastors. I admire your commitment to the local and global church. My prayer is that what follows will help you develop a CORE team, which is the solid foundation from which to build a discipling culture.²

FOUNDATION PROBLEMS

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you.”

JESUS, LUKE 14:28-29

Bonanno Pisano was a man of great vision. This twelfth-century sculptor combined physical strength and patience with an intricate eye for detail—widely diverse skills that the work of a sculptor required. Such an artisan is always in demand. Leaders of cities across the region would invite him to complete projects that would bring status to their cities and enhance their legacies. Time and time again, Pisano delivered the highest quality craftsmanship with superior artistic perspective and detail. He was a remarkable sculptor, a man of great vision, calling forth vivid images from stone and bronze.

What prompted the famous sculptor to try his hand at architecture is a mystery. Perhaps it was ego or simply an inability

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to say no, but whatever the reason, on August 9, 1173, Pisano started building a tower that would become the defining project of his life. Launched with funding from an opera-house widow, the tower was to be part of a great cathedral complex and would stand as a sign to the nations of his hometown's grandeur. As the white building rose straight and true, the residents of Pisa watched with pride.

The first person to notice the tilt is a mystery too: It could have been a local laborer, a visiting professional, or perhaps even a child. But in 1178, after nearly five years of steady progress, some observant soul pointed out that the tower seemed to be leaning, ever so slightly, to the south.

The drama that ensued from that one simple observation has been lost to history, but it's easy to imagine. That person told another who told another until word reached Bonanno Pisano. Of course, he wouldn't have believed it at first. The very idea likely offended him. After all, the now two-story tower had been straight as an arrow since he'd laid the foundation over four years earlier. But an accusation that serious forced him to walk away from the tower and take a good, long look to see for himself.

The tower was indeed leaning.

Pisano's "crooked-tower moment" did to him what it would do to most people. He was devastated and embarrassed. News of the lean traveled fast. His city was trying to grow its reputation, but his leaning tower would be mocked instead of admired. How could this have happened?

Instead of rising to the height of his expectations, the tower revealed the level of his training. Pisano had skill, clear vision, and commitment, but he had missed something important: The

problem was with the foundation—and it was too big for him to fix. He abandoned the tower and hoped history wouldn't remember his mistake.

Today the Leaning Tower of Pisa is a world-famous landmark. At the time, however, it was a cautionary tale. How had such a critical problem hidden itself from view for over four years? What could be done about it? The leaders of this Italian city would wrestle with those questions for the next eight hundred years.

The story of the Leaning Tower of Pisa is a textbook example of the impact of a foundation problem. But it's far from the only one. In Pisa alone, there are two other towers that lean. Outside Pisa, the world has dozens of unintentionally leaning towers, including London's Big Ben and San Francisco's Millennium Tower.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa holds many lessons for architects, engineers, and city planners—and yes, even disciplinmaking leaders.

A Solid Foundation for Disciplinmaking

Architecture and church leadership may seem miles apart, but each one demands careful planning and execution in order to withstand the challenges that are sure to come. Disciplinmaking leaders must learn to lay a foundation that won't sink or shift over time.

A strong foundation is vitally important because without one, leaders risk the same outcome Pisano experienced—rapid growth masquerading as progress before eventually falling in on itself. What remains in the rubble are broken promises, loads of unrecoverable time, and the leader's confidence. Whether the problem is recognized as an embarrassing “crooked-tower moment” or a full implosion, rebuilding is not an easy task.

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Many leaders have learned the hard way that discipling can appear to thrive—for years, even—yet still fail to develop into a discipling culture. Pastor Norm is one of those leaders. Years into faithful leadership of his church, Pastor Norm decided they needed more intentional discipling. He found a resource he liked and started investing in some men on Tuesday mornings. Six months later he asked them to go and do the same. And they did! The next year his church of three hundred had over fifteen discipling groups. Pastor Norm and the elders were thrilled that their dedication to discipling had so quickly yielded such great results.

Four years after the first group, Pastor Norm had his crooked-tower moment. For the first time, the total number of discipling groups declined. The decline continued year after year and led to a full-on collapse.

Something had gone terribly wrong. Upon investigation, they learned what it was: People would participate in a group, then lead a group, and then most would simply opt out. The replication of groups, it turns out, wasn't a reliable indicator of individual transformation. Instead of making disciples of Jesus, church members were simply making disciples of the discipling curriculum.

Pastor Norm was crushed. He didn't know what to do or what to conclude. Was it discipling that didn't work? Was it his fault? Had he missed something? With no one to turn to, he couldn't be sure. Within a few short months, discipling at the church reverted to what it was before Pastor Norm started his first group. In his discouragement he decided to return to what he was sure of: preaching and shepherding. Everyone had meant well, but without the necessary foundation, the illusion of progress

destroyed Norm's confidence in himself as a disciplemaker and in disciplemaking as an effective ministry.

Norm's story isn't unique. This is the story of many church and ministry leaders—the story of trusting in “the next thing” to make disciples, a story of hope that ends in deep disappointment.

The bad news is that the next thing almost never works. The good news is that next-thing thinking isn't the only way. There's a better way.

For disciplemaking to last in your church or ministry, it needs to be part of the DNA of your church or ministry culture. For that to happen, you will need to build a disciplemaking foundation. A disciplemaking culture isn't “the next thing”—it's the first thing, the thing that will finally put all the next things into their proper place.

Understanding that is easy. Building a disciplemaking culture is incredibly costly. But it's also worth it.

Defining Terms

Words are the tools we use to communicate ideas, and when they are uncared for, they rust. Rusty words cannot accomplish the job of clear communication. And clear communication is foundational to every culture-making effort.

Disciplemaking words have been used carelessly for decades and are full of rust. Many church and ministry leaders use words like *disciple*, *discipleship*, and *disciplemaking* in loose, inconsistent, and often completely unrelated ways. Instead of bringing clarity, they have become a source of confusion and frustration. To foster good communication throughout this book and in your

own disciplemaking culture, I will define key terms. (See also appendix A.)

Disciple: Someone who follows Jesus in order to become just like Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus.

Note the contrast with the dictionary definition of *disciple*: “One who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another.”¹ Our definition of *disciple* tethers the term to the gospel and helps distinguish between people who merely agree with Jesus’ teachings and those who actively strive to embody those teachings. It speaks to *motivation*: To become just like Jesus is what motivates a disciple; it anchors the act of following Jesus to a fixed goal.

The phrase *being changed by Jesus* acknowledges the mysterious relationship between our efforts and Jesus’ transformative work in us. The phrase *committed to the mission of Jesus* reminds us that there is work to be done. We are to pursue those who don’t know Jesus.² Taken together, our definition is broad enough to include brand-new disciples of Jesus and those who have been following Him for decades. Everyone is called to be a disciple.

Discipleship: The process of helping a disciple grow to Christlike maturity—minus intentional movement toward making other disciples.

The word *discipleship* has been nearly devoured with rust; this definition aims to free it. *Discipleship* has become the contemporary church’s Swiss Army-knife term for anything and everything.

It's typically used synonymously with *disciplemaking*, though both terms deserve conceptual independence from each other.

Usually, *discipleship* refers to anything that helps someone grow as a disciple (events, classes, workshops, etc.), but it can also refer to relational settings (small groups, cohorts, mentoring, triads, even one-on-one relationships). No matter what the setting, the focus of discipleship is usually on helping disciples grow. As the definition here reflects, discipleship typically does not include orienting disciples toward disciplemaking.

Because of the extreme rust on the word *discipleship*, I rarely use it.

Defining *Disciplemaking*

That brings us to *disciplemaking*. A short discussion is needed before we define this word, since clarity is imperative for building a disciplemaking foundation and culture. What is disciplemaking?

- Is disciplemaking simply “doing deliberate spiritual good to help [someone] follow Christ,” as one leading pastor suggests?³
- Is disciplemaking “everything the church does,” as another pastor told me?
- Is disciplemaking “something that only God can do,” as a faithful Christ-follower once told me?
- Is disciplemaking merely leadership development, as a misreading of Jesus’ words and actions in Mark 3:14-15 and Matthew 28:18-20 might indicate?

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Perhaps the bigger, more challenging question is this: Is it possible to define *disciplemaking* in a way that captures the essence of Jesus' command to His disciples: "Go and make disciples of all nations"?⁴ Can such a definition exist without denigrating the other work of the Kingdom?

Let's start by acknowledging three truths that complicate the matter.

1. God has given us the job of making disciples.⁵
2. God ultimately is the One who causes disciples to grow.⁶
3. Disciples can be made effectively in many ways.

The challenge of clearly communicating about disciplemaking revolves around these three truths and the half-truths that often grow out of them. To protect against those half-truths, let's agree on three things:

First, since God gave us the job of making disciples, let's agree that we can do it. But let's also acknowledge that we can only do it as we abide in Him.⁷ It would be outside God's character to give us a job that we couldn't do in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Second, even if we don't abide in Christ, we can expect mature disciples to emerge from every church or ministry. This is the result of the Spirit's work in the lives of individual believers.⁸ It's easy to see why many believe only God can make disciples, especially since this second truth shows that He does the heavy lifting! Many leaders are misled by the presence of mature disciples in their church or ministry, but mature disciples are *always* part of God's grace to a congregation. They are only *sometimes* the result of intentional ministry. Leaders must remember that the mere

development of mature disciples does not necessarily indicate effective discipling. Mature disciples could emerge because of what you (and God) did, in spite of what you did, or for reasons unrelated to what you did.

Third, since there are many ways to make a disciple, careful thought must be given to *how* we make a disciple. This is especially important because disciples will *go in the same ways they have grown*. In other words, the way a disciple is made is the way that disciple will naturally go to make disciples in the future. So *how* a disciple is made is critically important.

A discipling maker's choices will impact generations of disciples. The same principle is at work in parenting. This is why so many of us wake up one day to realize that we've become our father or mother! Normally such a comforting (or disturbing) insight comes all of a sudden as we are actively parenting our own children. Our choices impact not only those we disciple but also those they will disciple and the ones *they* will disciple—for generations.

I don't point this out to raise your anxiety, but to raise your intentionality. Our calling is too high to engage in haphazard discipling. Fortunately, the example Jesus set can anchor our intentionality. Put simply, *Jesus' way of making disciples is the best way*.

Jesus-Style Discipling

The Scriptures teach us that Jesus' life *and* ministry are examples for us to follow.⁹ Since Jesus' way is the best way, our goal isn't simply to make disciples, but to make disciples in a manner consistent with Jesus' example. Sadly, many fail to make disciples because their imitation of Jesus ends at His morals. However, as pastor and

author Jim Putman often says, “We cannot separate the teachings of Jesus from the methods of Jesus and expect to get the results of Jesus.”

Let’s acknowledge that there’s a practical limit to our imitation. In over twenty-five years of discipling, I’ve yet to meet someone who travels with twelve disciples day and night from place to place. It’s not the exact form or experience of discipling that we seek to emulate, but rather the principles that undergird His method and point us toward His style. Jesus’ method of discipling becomes the fixed point from which we can consider the validity of all possible (and potentially effective) ways to make a disciple.

There is wide agreement that the eight principles laid out in Robert E. Coleman’s classic book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*¹⁰ represent Jesus’ discipling style well.¹¹ Those principles are frequently condensed to three: *relational*, *intentional*, and *missional*.

In that light, let’s define *discipling*:

1. *The motivation*. Discipling is a specific type of relationship carried out by individuals whose *primary motivation* is being like Jesus (the Christological motivation), participating in the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12 (the covenantal motivation), or reaching the nations in an expansion of God’s Kingdom (the missional motivation).

Motivation is important because *why* we do something makes a difference in *how* we do it and *how long* we will do it (more on this in chapter 2). Each of these motivations puts God and His plan at the center (not us), and each one also incorporates a strong personal reason to disciple others.

2. *The methods.* Disciplemaking must be carried out with *methods* that are relational, intentional, and missional. This is Jesus' way, which is the best way. We can expect disciplemaking relationships to become warped when we do not align our methods with His.

The motivation to replace Jesus' methods with other methods is often driven by a desire for greater speed, scale, and efficiency. However, replacing relationship with programs, ongoing intentionality with events, and mission with meeting needs simply doesn't produce the same results.

3. *The multiplication.* Disciplemaking always leads to *multiplication*. The multiplying fruit of disciplemaking produces new disciples (converts), new disciplemakers, and a three-dimensional momentum. If disciplemaking never reaches the lost, then it doesn't follow Jesus' style, because Jesus came "to seek and to save the lost."¹² Jesus' disciples embodied that priority as they went. If disciplemaking doesn't produce new disciplemakers, it misses the essential element of becoming like Jesus in a holistic sense. Jesus made disciples, so to become like Him is to go and do likewise. Finally, Jesus' style of disciplemaking produces momentum that moves (1) out toward the lost, (2) in toward the church, and (3) down into the life of the individual believer. The body of Christ is built up and expanded by this momentum.¹³

The result of this multiplicative orientation of disciplemaking is generations of disciples who move freely across social, racial, economic, or political boundaries.

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To sum up, then, **disciplemaking** can be defined as follows:

A specific type of relationship carried out by people who are primarily motivated by Christological, covenantal, or missional aims, using Jesus' methods that are relational, intentional, and missional. The relationship leads to fruit that multiplies in the form of new disciples, new disciplers, and momentum in three dimensions: (1) out toward the lost, (2) in toward the church, and (3) down into the life of the individual disciple.

This definition is specific enough to provide a framework from which to assess whether or not something really fits Jesus' style of disciplemaking. At the same time, it's broad enough to include various forms of disciplemaking such as a very small group of five all the way down to one-on-one disciplemaking.

Such a definition does not exclude or denigrate those who disagree, but rather provides common language and a common target toward which we can all move.

Derived from that definition are the following:

Disciplemaker (or Disciplex/Reproducing Disciple/Multiplying Disciple/Laborer): A disciple who is motivated by Christological, covenantal, or missional aims to help at least one other disciple become like Jesus by following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and joining the mission of Jesus. Being a disciplemaker is marked by relationship, intentionality, and mission, and it continues until the one being disciplined becomes an experienced disciplemaker.

Every disciple of Jesus is called to grow into a disciplemaker. In addition to Matthew 4:19 and 28:19-20, Luke 6:40 makes this abundantly clear: “The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.”

Jesus-Style Disciplemaking: Disciplemaking that seeks to replicate in today’s world the principles used by Jesus in making disciples.

These definitions will aid communication throughout the following chapters. Next, we’ll turn our attention to defining a disciplemaking culture and learning why it’s worth the cost.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a crooked-tower moment in ministry? What did you learn from it?
2. What definitions of *discipleship*, *disciple*, and *disciplemaking* have you previously used (if any)?
3. How would accepting that “Jesus’ way of making disciples is the best way” make defining and evaluating disciplemaking easier?
4. What parts of the disciplemaking definition stand out most to you? Why?
5. Communicate what you’ve discovered to God. What next step is He asking you to take?