

FIRST STEPS DISCIPLESHIP | 2024 WHITE PAPER

THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF DISCIPLESHIP SCARCITY

ROOTS, RESULTS, & RESOLUTIONS

At least 80% of people entering the Christian faith will leave it within several weeks if no one discipless them.



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A white paper on

The Devastating Effects of Discipleship Scarcity
Roots, Results, & Resolutions

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Abstract

Christian discipleship in the West is scarce at best these days. At least 80% of people entering the Christian faith will leave it within several weeks if no one discipled them. And out of the mere 1-20% who stay, only 15-20% will actively engage the Faith and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Put another way, no more than 40 out of 1,000 people attracted to Christianity will likely be fruitful and grow into something worthy of imitation by others without discipleship.

If you're inclined to say, after reading this paper, "That's not my church!" Then, it's rare, and one of the less than 5% of American churches engaged in making disciples who make disciples. Everything presented here is detailed and supported in Dr. Braley's 2023 book *From Butts [in the Pews] to Be-Attitudes: Turning Consumers into Disciples*.¹ Much of what you'll read here can also be found in Grant Edwards' books *Conversations* and *Discipleship that Works*!²

Background

Today's Evangelical Christian culture is attractional and consumer-focused. Instead of transformation, the endgame is the numbers of 'butts in the seats' and dollars. Instead of patient evangelism to equip someone to choose to covenant with God through Christ, the push is to 'get people saved' and enable them to be passive participants. Nearly impossible is the biblical idea of *learning well, choosing well, and staying in the relationship* (e.g., 1 John chapter five, Romans 10:9-10, and John chapter 15). Therefore, a shrinking Christian population looks and acts like the world for the most part and remains stagnant.

As this paper will show, root causes include empty evangelism, inadequate modeling, almost no foundational discipleship, and little spiritual formation—all underpinned by missing deep, trusting relationships and the lack of imitation and replication.

Roots

A Business Focus

About 90% of a church budget is commonly earmarked for business expenses (infrastructure, salaries, etc.). For instance, a 2014 survey about church budgets reported that only nine percent of income funded international and domestic missions with no visible outlay for education or spiritual formation.³ The net result was that 91% of cash resources were earmarked for operations, with little left for love and training. The MAP of the ECCU reported similar results in 2012 (86% for operational expenses and only 14% for programs and charity) in response to an

¹ Available at www.Amazon.com, www.Barnesandnoble.com, and www.Xulonpress.com/bookstore.

² Available at www.Amazon.com and www.disciplinganother.com/shop. Consider reading Grant's other works, such as *Passing the Baton* and *Swimming Lessons*, and using his *First Steps* workbook.

³ *HOW CHURCHES SPEND THEIR MONEY: AN EXECUTIVE REPORT, An inside look at the 2014 Church Budget Priorities Study conducted by Christianity Today's Church Law & Tax Group*. The infographic showing a breakdown exists in the 2014 report and can also be seen at <https://www.cdfcapital.org/the-complete-guide-to-creating-a-church-budget/> (last accessed on March 11, 2024).

inquiry into spending plans.⁴ Yet, the Church is commanded to equip the saints to be and make disciples.

Missing Pre-conversion Expectations

Discipleship requires walking with people in their daily rhythms for the long haul. This is how the earliest Christianity flourished, and cost-counting expectations were established, imitated, and repeated. By the second century AD, evangelism, overlapping with foundational discipleship, often lasted as much as three years to ensure converts knew and accepted their covenantal responsibilities before baptism. This is not the case today. A get-saved thrust spearheaded by an unbiblical modern Sinner's Prayer unknown before the twentieth century sets no expectations and requires no devotion to God through Jesus. Also missing are the consequences of belief without devotion and action or not staying in a relationship with God through Jesus (e.g., James 2:14-26; John chapter 15).

Devotionless Conversion

Until about 150 years ago, being part of the Christian community involved a process of regeneration that began with a cry for Christ's acceptance of the individual and then personal commitment by the convert to God and the Church. Today, the Sinner's Prayer affirms God and sin's existence but requires no obligation or genuine repentance (a change in behavior from a change of heart). The 'decision' of the past was whether to devote to God and the Christian community after being well informed. The present's decision isn't informed nor covenantal but an inbound affirmation of Jesus that does little, if any, good for God or sinner. And, without setting expectations, including the need for devotion and abiding, there's no reason for a convert to engage in discipleship or disciple-making post-conversion.

Little Post-conversion Discipleship

Only about 18% of churchgoers engage in anything resembling discipleship (e.g., foundational mentoring or spiritual disciplines of charity, Bible study, fellowship, and accountability).⁵ And "fewer than 5% of churches in the US have a reproducing disciple-making culture."⁶ So, almost no modeling, foundational discipleship, transformation, or charitable love exists in our post-modern Western Christianity. Yet, these things aren't negotiable! Their scarcity produces devastating outcomes!

⁴ Ministry Advisory Panel (MAP) of the ECCU (Evangelical Christian Credit Union) budgetary table, December 2012, available at https://www.eccu.org/assets/general/Dec_2012_Table01.jpg (last accessed August 5, 2021). The report and infographic also exist at https://danieldailey.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/eccu_2013_church_budget_trends.pdf (as of March 11, 2024).

⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/> (last accessed March 11, 2024).

⁶ <https://crosswalkcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/National-Study-on-Disciple-Making-in-USA-Churches.docx.pdf> (last accessed March 11, 2024).

Results

False Conversions

According to information provided by Ray Comfort, Eternity Magazine, The Institute for American Church Growth, The Southern Baptist Convention, and The Assemblies of God, as many as 95% of people deciding to ‘accept’ Jesus backslid.⁷ These sources reported that only three percent of post-conference respondents joined a local church after the event; another stated a one-percent rate of Christ-followers six months post-event. Another said that only three percent of the thousands of post-conference respondents joined local congregations and stated, “It seems highly probable that most of the remaining 97% were not truly converted.”⁸ The Assemblies of God showed a net gain of five new attendees for every 100 recorded professions of faith.⁹ Potential converts can’t devote themselves to what they don’t know or understand. Therefore, there’s little motivation to stay or grow—especially without discipleship!

The Absence of Discipleship

Without discipleship, 80% or more of new believers will walk away from their newfound faith within several months.¹⁰ The lack of discipleship also encourages a passive laity who has no idea they are meant to participate in their formation and the foundational and formational training for others. Again, more than 80% of self-proclaimed Christians don’t study, pray, or stay accountable. Their stagnation, enabled by discipleship scarcity, produces nothing worthy of imitation (crucial to Christian discipleship and growth!) but unfruitful consumers of religion. As a result, a faithful, imitable core is shrinking.

A Shrinking Christ-following Core

Discipleship should be each believer’s highest priority as a disciple or disciple-maker. All else flows from it, from worship to spiritual growth. However, as presented, fewer than 20% of churchgoers regularly engage in discipleship or related activities like small groups, Bible study, fellowship, prayer, and accountability. Additionally, only 14% of today’s Christians appear to represent the actions and attitudes Barna researchers found consistent with those of Jesus.¹¹ This means that few worthy of imitation and replication exist in most churches, contributing to discipleship scarcity. But there’s hope—making discipleship, disciple-making, and consistent spiritual formation staples is possible!

⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, NY: Oxford Press, 2010), 30, Kindle.

⁸ David Malcolm Bennett, *The Sinner’s Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers* (Australia: Even Before Publishing, 2011), location 611-3, Kindle.

⁹ *Ibid.*, location 618-619.

¹⁰ Grant Edwards, *Discipleship That Works!*

¹¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees> (last accessed on March 11, 2024).

Resolutions

Western Christianity's ethos of scarce discipleship and resulting degradation can be changed! It would require modeling, setting expectations, foundational discipleship, spiritual formation, and holding converts accountable. It would also require a focus shift from 'get people saved' and business to devotion and equipping. Consider those paradigm shifts first.

Paradigm shifts

- From 'get saved' to 'learn, devote, and stay!' Introduce God's Kingdom to potential converts and help them count the cost of Christianity. Equip them to devote all they are and have to God through Christ. Then, the 'get saved' will take care of itself.
- From a business focus to an *equipping* mandate. Jesus didn't ask for buildings, salaries, and stuff. He did, however, command Christians to be something worth imitating and present themselves for discipleship and replication. Channel church resources into equipping the saints and becoming a *sending* agency. Grant Edwards' book *Discipleship That Works* is an excellent resource for making this happen.

Use Jesus' discipleship approach

Jesus taught us, through example, to walk with people in their daily life rhythms. Take it slow, and use the connection to tell, show, test, correct, and then send. Key to all of this is a deep, trusting relationship.

Relationship, relationship, relationship ...

Discipleship is impossible without deep, healthy relationships. Why? Because disciples need to 'buy what we're selling' and be confident that we'll listen and guide without judgment or gossip. Show your people how to build discipleship relationships. Encourage them to use existing trusting relationships to make disciples and, where possible, make disciples organically.

Organic Discipleship

Teach your folks that discipleship is about walking with people in their rhythms of life. It's about meeting them where they are in their contexts and communicating meaningfully. This builds trust and enables observation and correction (key to discipleship!). Instead of thrusting another building into a strange community and expecting people to 'come,' equip your people to 'go' and organically grow the Church from within their communities, as was done in the earliest Christianity. Modeling is critical here!

Influence through modeling

Words only go so far—especially if there's no motivation to put them to work. Instead, be something worthy of imitation and teach your people to do the same. This is essential to effective discipleship! Paul imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). He encouraged Timothy to repeat what he learned so that others could do the same (2 Timothy 2:1-2). Finally, Paul commended the Thessalonian Christians for their imitation and modeling (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7). Similarly, modeling and imitation will ensure potential converts are adequately equipped to enter a covenant with God through Jesus.

Evangelize/disciple thoroughly ...

... before expecting a 'decision.' This should be done primarily through modeling and conversations introducing and explaining God's Kingdom. Ensure a potential convert understands God's desires in a mutually beneficial relationship with Him (be a disciple, make disciples, be transformed, practice sexual purity, stay in the relationship, etc.). Then, the 'decision' should be an outward complete devotion, not an inward acceptance. This is the spirit of 'making Jesus Lord' (Romans 10:9-10).

Foundational discipleship

Grant Edward's *Discipleship That Works* explains that all converts must receive training in fundamental principles such as Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and resisting temptation. The resulting Christian foundation can then launch a disciple into transformation. Grant's *Conversations* is an excellent tool for guiding disciples and disciple-makers in foundational discipleship.

Spiritual formation

Once a solid foundation is formed through discipleship, encourage and equip converts to engage in never-ending spiritual formation through regular Bible study, prayer, disciple-making, charity, and accountability.

Accountability

Accountability fits into the steps of testing and correcting in Jesus' discipleship approach. Hold converts accountable for growth and righteousness. Without accountability, there's no sharpening or growth, and congregations become poisoned. Christians must bear each other's burdens and restore sinners (Galatians 6:1-2) and confess their sins for healing and maturity (James 5:16). In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus expressed the need to attempt reconciliation and then expulsion for practitioners of sin. Paul chastised the Corinthian church for harboring a sexual sinner (1 Corinthians 5) and the Thessalonian church for enabling slackers (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). Accountability, along with Bible study and prayer, can be transformational!

Summary

Discipleship should be the Church's prime objective. However, fewer than 5% of Western Protestant churches make disciples who make disciples. Resulting discipleship scarcity encourages a Body where 80% or more are spiritually-lethargic, unfruitful churchgoers who don't study the Bible, pray, or embrace accountability. So, spiritual growth and Lordship by Jesus have become nearly impossible.

Reasons for the scarcity of discipleship include churches' business focus, model-less evangelism, devotion-less conversion, and missing post-conversion modeling, imitation, discipleship, and accountability. However, the trend can change if churches become equipping and sending agencies by modeling and encouraging organic relationship-building, foundational discipleship, formational spiritual growth, and accountability.

Instead of *build and come*, let's encourage *go and make*. Instead of *letting Jesus in*, let's equip people to make *outward devotional decisions*. Instead of encouraging *butts in the pews*, let's produce fruitful disciple-makers who *walk by the Spirit*. Instead of *getting saved and waiting for heaven*, let's *train for transformation and fruitfulness today*.¹² Instead of a Christ-following core of only *20% of 20%*, let's keep and prepare *at least 80%* of everyone introduced to God's Kingdom. Yes, *let's!*

¹² The current *get-saved quick culture* is a relatively new, post-reformation phenomenon. Until the Reformation, the Church adhered to a 'choose well and stay' ethos (e.g., Matthew 15) and a last-day salvation that sought transformation from conversion to salvation (e.g., 1 Peter 1:3-12). There was no 'saved' line in the sand, but a new way of life that counted the cost first without looking back after devoting all to God. And, about the anticipation of hanging around waiting to *go to heaven*: The idea isn't scriptural and can encourage spiritual lethargy. God created people to partner with Him in managing creation on the earth. One day, He'll return everything to perfection, and His realm and ours will again overlap as they did in Eden. Although God's people may await in Paradise for that day, they'll be right here on a renewed planet Earth to resume their God-given work. Prepare your people to endure until then.