

Disciple Making: The Essential Task of the Church

Meta Description: Disciple making is the essential task that determines the quality of everything else. Discover how missional movements are essentially disciple-making systems.

Excerpt: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18-20)

These final words of Jesus establish disciple making as the primary task of the church. Disciple making is the essential task of embodying the message and mission of Jesus, the Founder. It is perhaps the next most critical element in mDNA after Jesus is Lord, because it is the essential task of discipleship to embody the message and mission of Jesus.

In this article, we'll explore what disciple making truly means, why it matters for missional impact, and how it works through life-on-life relationships and simple reproducible systems. We'll discover how missional movements are essentially disciple-making systems that never get beyond disciple making as a core practice.

Reading Time: 12 minutes

Introduction

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These final words of Jesus establish disciple making as the primary task of the church. Jesus could have commissioned his followers to do many things—build buildings, create programs, organize events. Instead, he called them to make disciples.

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What is Disciple Making?

Disciple making is the essential task of embodying the message and mission of Jesus, the Founder. It is the core practice of forming people into the image of Christ through life-on-life relationships, intentional formation, and comprehensive transformation. At its core, discipleship is about becoming like Jesus—not merely intellectual assent to theological propositions, but transformation that comes from walking closely with Jesus and allowing his Spirit to shape us into his image.

"At its core, discipleship is about becoming like Jesus. It is about embodying his message and mission in our daily lives."

—*The Forgotten Ways*, Chapter 5

Authentic discipleship involves following Jesus, learning from Jesus, being transformed by Jesus, multiplying disciples, and living missionally. It is the essential task on which Jesus focused his efforts and invested most of his time and energy. He took very seriously the selection and development of that motley band of followers on whose feeble and trembling shoulders he lay the entire redemptive movement that would emerge from his death and resurrection.

The biblical foundation for disciple making begins with Jesus's call to his first disciples: "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:27). This call was not merely an invitation to believe, but to follow—to become like the one being followed. Jesus invested three years of his life in these twelve men, living with them, teaching them, showing them the way.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) establishes disciple making as the primary task of the church. This commission makes clear that disciple making involves both conversion (baptism) and formation (teaching to obey). The New Testament consistently presents discipleship as comprehensive transformation. Paul writes, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Discipleship is about becoming who we were created to be—people who do the good works God prepared for us.

Why Disciple Making Matters

Disciple making matters because it is the single most crucial factor that will determine the quality of the whole. If we fail on this point, then we must fail in all the others. In fact, if we fail here, it is unlikely that we will even get to any of the other elements of mDNA in any meaningful and lasting way.

"When dealing with discipleship and the related capacity to generate authentic followers of Jesus, we are dealing with that single most crucial factor that will in the end determine the quality of the whole—if we fail on this point, then we must fail in all the others."

—*The Forgotten Ways*, Chapter 5

It matters because discipleship is the very task on which Jesus focused his efforts. He invested most of his time and energy in making disciples. The founding of the whole Christian movement was initiated through the simple acts of Jesus investing his life and embedding his teachings in his followers and developing them into authentic disciples.

It matters because missional movements are essentially disciple-making systems. They never appear to get beyond disciple making as a core practice because discipleship is at once the starting point, the abiding strategic practice, and the key to all lasting missional impact. Whether one looks at the Wesleyan, the Franciscan, or the Chinese phenomenon, at core they are essentially composed of, and led by, disciples, and they are absolutely clear about the disciple-making mandate.

Without meaningful discipleship, there can be no real movement and therefore no significant impact for the gospel. The health and growth of transformative Jesus movements are directly related to their capacity to make disciples. No disciples, no movement—it's that simple.

How Disciple Making Works

Disciple making works through life-on-life relationships, simple reproducible systems, and the priesthood of all believers. These elements work together to create comprehensive transformation that results in

multiplication.

Life-on-Life Relationships

Disciple making is not about programs or curricula, but about life-on-life relationships. Jesus modeled this by investing three years of his life in twelve men, living with them, teaching them, showing them the way. This relational approach to discipleship involves:

- **Presence:** Being with people in their daily lives
- **Modeling:** Showing them how to follow Jesus through example
- **Teaching:** Instructing them in the ways of Jesus
- **Coaching:** Helping them grow and develop
- **Sending:** Releasing them to make disciples themselves

This relational approach creates transformation that goes deeper than information transfer. It involves the whole person—mind, soul, and will—in the process of becoming like Jesus.

Simple, Reproducible Systems

While disciple making is relational, it also benefits from simple, reproducible systems that can be easily transferred. Life Transformation Groups (LTGs) and DNA Groups provide examples of such systems:

Life Transformation Groups (LTGs): Developed by Neil Cole of Church Multiplication Associates, LTGs involve a simple pattern of Bible reading, storytelling, personal accountability, and prayer. In the CMA movement, it is required that all who call themselves Christians be in an LTG, and not just in the initial phases of the Christian life. It is an ongoing commitment for all who are involved, including leadership at every level.

DNA Groups: DNA stands for Discipleship, Nurture, and Accountability. Every community member is encouraged to join a DNA: a group of two to five people meeting regularly for discussion, support, and prayer. Accountability questions might include: Whom have you blessed this week? With whom have you eaten? Have you sensed any promptings from God? What scriptures or resources have encouraged your growth? How have you sensed yourself carrying out God's work?

"We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple."
—*The Forgotten Ways*, Chapter 5, quoting Neil Cole

These simple systems allow the message to be easily transferred. They make disciple making accessible to everyone, not just professional ministers. The simplicity allows for rapid multiplication while maintaining depth of transformation.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Movements that change the world are "people movements"—every believer as a minister, empowered for mission. This is rooted in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Empowerment is a core leadership function; Jesus modeled this by sending his disciples into active, meaningful service soon after calling them. People should be recognized as agents of the Kingdom from the moment they come to faith.

"Movements that change the world are 'people movements'—every believer as a minister, empowered for mission."
—*The Forgotten Ways Handbook*, Chapter 3

This means that disciple making is not the exclusive domain of professional ministers. Every believer is called and equipped to make disciples. The fivefold ministry (APEST) exists to equip all God's people for works of service, which includes making disciples. When every believer is empowered to make disciples, the movement multiplies exponentially.

The Challenge of Consumerism

For Christians who live in the Western world, the major challenge to the viability of Christianity is consumerism. It is a far more serious and insidious challenge to the gospel than other religions or worldviews, because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us. Consumerism offers identity, purpose, meaning, and community—all the things that religion offers.

Advertisers have become the official priesthood of a new and all-pervasive religion, deliberately co-opting theological ideas and religious symbols to sell products. We must find a way to deal with consumerism if we are going to be effective witnesses for the way of Jesus in the twenty-first century. This requires active resistance to the consumerist mindset that treats faith as a product to be consumed rather than a life to be lived.

The challenge for the Western church is to recover authentic discipleship in the face of consumerism and institutional Christianity. We must raise the bar—make discipleship the central requirement for participation in Christian community, not an optional extra. We must simplify church—make it simple enough that anyone can participate, but demanding enough that it requires genuine commitment.

The goal is to "lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple." If the experience of church is so simple that just about anyone can do it, and the church is made up of people who have taken up their cross and follow Jesus at any cost, the result will be a movement that empowers the common Christian to do the uncommon works of God.

Practices for Disciple Making

Creating a culture of disciple making involves several key practices:

1. Make Discipleship the Central Requirement

Discipleship must be the central requirement for participation in Christian community, not an optional extra. This means that everyone who calls themselves a Christian is expected to be engaged in the process of becoming like Jesus. This includes leadership at every level—discipleship is not just for new believers.

2. Create Simple, Reproducible Systems

Develop simple systems like LTGs or DNA Groups that can be easily transferred. These systems should be accessible to everyone, not just those with theological training. The simplicity allows for rapid multiplication while maintaining depth of transformation.

3. Empower All Believers

Recognize that every believer is called and equipped to make disciples. Create pathways for all believers to discover and express their calling. Empower people to function as agents of the Kingdom from the moment

they come to faith.

4. Model Discipleship

Leaders must model the discipleship lifestyle they expect from others. You cannot expect others to pursue a discipleship lifestyle that leaders do not demonstrate. As the saying goes, "Habits are more easily caught than taught."

5. Create a Culture of Growth

Encourage a significant portion of your community—such as one-quarter of your members—to meet regularly in small groups for prayer and accountability. When discipleship is expected of everyone, and when key people participate in discipleship practices, a community ethos emerges in which spiritual growth is seen as both normal and desirable.

6. Integrate Action and Reflection

Discipleship is forged in everyday life, blending action and reflection. Establish regular times to act, reflect, pray, and build theological frameworks together. Both formal and informal practices of action-reflection are essential. Follow Jesus's model: on-the-road, in the world—not just in formal religious settings.

Conclusion

Disciple making is the essential task of embodying the message and mission of Jesus, the Founder. It is perhaps the next most critical element in mDNA after Jesus is Lord, because it is the essential task of discipleship to embody the message and mission of Jesus. If we fail on this point, then we must fail in all the others.

Missional movements are essentially disciple-making systems. They never appear to get beyond disciple making as a core practice because discipleship is at once the starting point, the abiding strategic practice, and the key to all lasting missional impact. Without meaningful discipleship, there can be no real movement and therefore no significant impact for the gospel.

Disciple making works through life-on-life relationships, simple reproducible systems, and the priesthood of all believers. These elements work together to create comprehensive transformation that results in multiplication. The challenge for the Western church is to recover authentic discipleship in the face of consumerism, making discipleship the central requirement for participation in Christian community.

Call to Action: Begin or join a Life Transformation Group or DNA Group today. Make discipleship the central requirement for your participation in Christian community. Empower others to make disciples, recognizing that every believer is called and equipped for this essential task.

Related Content:

- [Disciple Making Master Document](#)
- [Disciple Making FAQ](#)
- [Disciple Making Implementation Guide](#)
- [Metanoia: The Gateway to the Mind of Christ](#)
- [Apostolic Environment: The Foundation for All Ministries](#)

Categories: mDNA Elements, Discipleship, Spiritual Formation

Tags: disciple making, discipleship, Great Commission, life transformation groups, DNA groups, consumerism, missional movement

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