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Greg Ogden

author of *Discipleship Essentials*

TRANSFORMING
DISCIPLESHIP

Making Disciples a Few at a Time

REVISED AND EXPANDED

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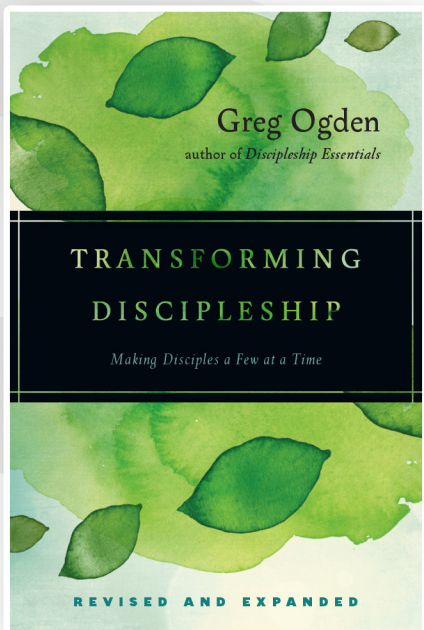
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Greg Ogden address the need for discipleship in the local church and recovers Jesus' method of accomplishing life change by investing in just a few people at a time. Ogden sets forth his vision for transforming both the individual disciple and discipleship itself, showing how discipleship can become a self-replicating process with ongoing impact from generation to generation. This revised and updated edition includes a new chapter on discipleship and preaching.

"This book brings out the importance of discipleship and illustrates the processes of healthy, reproducible methods of disciple making."

—Pradeep Jha, president, Tabernacle Ministries

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Making Disciples a Few at a Time

REVISED AND EXPANDED

Greg Ogden

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INTRODUCTION

A Story of Transformation



I admit I stumbled onto a discovery, yet it has become one of the most amazing *ahas* of my pastoral ministry. This discovery was the result of an experiment. I had written a first draft of a discipleship curriculum, which turned into the final project for my doctor of ministry degree.¹ The focus of the project was to use this curriculum in the local church and then to evaluate its effectiveness. Up to this point in my ministry I had equated making disciples with a one-to-one relationship. After all, wasn't the Paul-Timothy model the definition of discipling? The point was to grow a disciple who would make a disciple, and so on.

My adviser in the doctoral program suggested that I consider a variety of contexts in which I could test the curriculum and then track the varied dynamics of a discipling relationship. One of the options I chose was to invite two other people to join me on the journey to maturity in Christ. I did not anticipate the potency that would be unleashed in what I have come to call a microgroup (a group of three or four).

It would forever change my understanding of the means the Holy Spirit uses to transform people into Christ's image.

Eric's Story of Transformation

To illustrate the power of microgroups, let me tell the story of Eric's transformation. Eric was one of my first two recruits on this discipleship adventure. He had approached me stating his interest in a mentoring relationship. In retrospect Eric's spiritual ambivalence at the time may

not have made him the best candidate for an intensive investment. He was just two years out of college. Looking like a fashion model who had walked straight out of the pages of a men's clothing catalog, Eric was the envy of his male friends. Because of his chiseled good looks, attracting women was either the least of his problems or his greatest temptation, depending how you look at it. He was making more money than he had ever dreamed possible with a promising future with his new company. All of this was quite alluring to him.

Along with the world's enticement, Eric also had a strong pull toward following Christ. It was a matter of who would win this tug of war—Jesus or the world. I mentioned to Eric that I had written a new curriculum and was eager to have some people try it. I made sure he knew that to be involved in this relationship would require an intense investment: a topical study of Scripture and its application to daily life, memorization of Bible verses, and weekly transparent interaction with me and one other person. The bar was set high, yet Eric said he was willing to give it a go.

A restaurant located equidistant between our workplaces became the locale where we were joined by Karl, who at the time was an administrator of an engineering firm. Over lunch we laid our open Bibles and study materials on the restaurant table and proceeded to interact over the content. Immediately, I was impressed by the energetic interchange in our conversation. Something about adding a third party to one-on-one discussions made our conversation come alive. Even though I was the only pastor among the three, I didn't sense that I had to be the focal point or the ever-flowing fountain of wisdom. Our relationship turned into peer discipling in which each of us could honestly share our insights into the Word and its application to our life settings.

Eric was quite open about his divided heart. The enticement of a life of comfort and serial female relationships seemed inviting. He told us about making eye contact with an attractive female motorist while driving through Los Angeles traffic. The next thing he knew, they had pulled off on a side street to exchange phone numbers. Karl and I listened to the story with more than a bit of envy, without any comparable stories to tell. Yet we also understood how seductive sexual power could be for Eric. It was creating a fissure in his heart.

Still, Eric could not get away from the magnetic appeal of Jesus Christ. There was something about the power of the person of Jesus and the life of adventure he has called us to that would not allow Eric to shake him off. In our second lesson we explored Jesus' normative standard for all who would follow him. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Eric was faced with the same choice Moses posed to the people of Israel: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . . Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19).

It was not too many weeks into our time together that Eric announced he was going to quit his job and see the world. He wanted to take the better part of a year for a freelance exploration of this planet. In his young, carefree and unattached years he desired to do what he might not be able to do later when more responsibilities would weigh on him. He reasoned that he could always get a job when he returned, but this stage of his life would come only once. This decision precipitated some forthright interchange. It was evident that Eric was drifting into a life of self-absorption. Searching for a way to speak to his wanderlust, I said, "Eric, at least consider taking a month or two of this time to invest somewhere in a mission opportunity. Pause long enough to immerse yourself in God's work in your travels and rub shoulders with some amazing servants of Christ who are giving themselves away for the sake of the gospel."

I don't remember the exact sequence of events or steps in the shift, but before I knew it, Eric decided to abandon his vagabond plans. The shift of focus was startling and dramatic. He signed on for a summer mission opportunity with Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU) in Hungary and Poland. This was prior to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. I have often reflected on the power of being able to speak a word of truth or challenge into a life. If we had not had the regularity of relationship and the trust that had been built in those few months, I doubt that Eric would have had a context in which to hear a confrontative word that had the potential to redirect his life.

When Eric returned that summer from his adventures, he was transformed. His divided heart had become singularly subsumed under the lordship of Jesus. Eric regaled us with stories of sharing the gospel on the lakeside beaches of Hungary and stealthy forays into Poland. People were hungry for the good news, and he saw Jesus Christ grab hold of and redirect lives, not the least of which was his own.

Upon his return Eric immediately joined the Campus Crusade staff with the intent of taking business people into the Eastern-bloc countries in order to crack open their hearts to the work of the life-changing gospel in these barricaded regions. At the same time he reconnected with a high school sweetheart, who also was a passionate follower of Jesus. It seemed only a matter of months before they were engaged and Betsy was ready to join Eric on staff with Campus Crusade. These two lit up rooms with their radiant joy in service to Christ and their love for each other. They honored me by asking me to perform their wedding in Portland, Oregon, alongside Betsy's pastor.

A number of weeks prior to the wedding, Eric was experiencing debilitating back pain, which he assumed was caused by a recent motorcycle accident. Even with physical therapy, however, he was showing no improvement. On the Monday prior to their Saturday wedding, the source of the back pain was discovered. A tumor was pressing against Eric's spine. Testicular cancer had spread to multiple parts of his body. The prognosis was not good. He was admitted to the hospital that same day and began a heavy regimen of chemotherapy.

Of course, Eric and Betsy had some immediate decisions to make. Would the wedding proceed? Yes, Eric and Betsy's spirits were undaunted. Where should the wedding be held? This called for a quick change of venue. The church wedding was replaced by the hospital chapel, which could hold a standing-room-only crowd. The scene could have been something out of a made-for-TV movie designed to manipulate emotions. But this was real life. Eric's hospital bed was rolled into the chapel with Eric propped up at an almost ninety-degree angle. The bed covers came up to his waist, with his upper torso appropriately dressed in his tuxedo. Betsy, his bride, stood bedside, holding Eric's hand in her right hand and her bouquet in the left. The wedding party flanked

the bed on either side. There is usually considerable anticipation at weddings, but rarely is the air as thick with lump-in-the-throat emotions as it was in this packed chapel. Now three decades after this event, I have no trouble remembering the thickness in my windpipe and the struggle to focus on my notes through my misty eyes.

In the ensuing months the chemotherapy took a toll on this handsome man. On his better days Eric was able to travel. I still have vivid images of him walking into our Southern California church with his knit cap covering his billiard-ball head, and looking gaunt. Yet his spirit was undaunted. He radiated the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ. I knew that this was a man living the words of the apostle Paul, “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

When things took a turn for the worse and Eric had to go back into the hospital for further treatments, I flew to Portland to visit him. As I was walking toward Eric’s hospital room, some of his buddies from high school were exiting. These young men, who could normally make light of anything, were unusually sullen. One of them said to me, “You know what Eric said? He said this cancer is the best thing that ever happened to him. Can you believe that?” Eric obviously would have preferred it otherwise, but he had come to cast his entire hope upon Jesus Christ, and his Lord and Lover had not let him down.

In a note to me, Eric said of his discoveries,

God is helping me grow closer to him. It [the cancer] has made me realize whom I have to depend on. And I have seen through these experiences that when I do call upon God that he really helps in his way. It may not mean that he will relieve the pain or that he will cure the cancer immediately. It may mean that I die, or live . . . that does not matter. What is important is that I keep my eyes on him.

One morning a doctor came in when Betsy was with me and said, “I want to tell you the X-rays are not very encouraging. You may want to consider getting things in order and stopping treatment.” This was the first time it occurred to me that I might die. I might not live through this.

It really caused me to reassess what I am placing my faith in. Am I placing my faith in the doctors and drugs, or am I placing my faith in God? If I am placing my faith in God, I have the assurance that he will deliver me out of the situation I am in. . . . It may not mean that he will cure the cancer or that I will survive. . . . But that is not what is important. It goes back to keeping my eyes on him.

On April 25, 1986, seven months after his marriage to Betsy, Eric died at the age of twenty-five. Here was a man who in a short time went from ambivalence about following Jesus Christ to wholehearted trust and devotion.

Our Journey of Transformation

I introduce this book with Eric's story because in essence the change in Eric is what this book is about—the process and context for transformation into Christlikeness. What I stumbled into with Eric and Karl opened up for me an exploratory journey into the optimum settings and ingredients necessary to create the conditions for being conformed to the image of Christ. Since this initial experience I have witnessed repeatedly the power of microgroups. They provide the setting to bring together the necessary elements for transformation or growth to maturity in Christ. What have I observed in this setting?

- Multiplication or reproduction: empowering those who are discipled to disciple others
- Intimate relationships: developing deep trust as the soil for life change
- Accountability: lovingly speaking truth into another's life
- Incorporation of the biblical message: covering the themes of Scripture sequentially to create a holistic picture of the Christian life
- Spiritual disciplines: practicing the habits that lead to intimacy with Christ and service to others

This book will introduce to you a missing tool in the arsenal of disciple making that will lead to life-transforming experiences such as Eric's. For three decades I have had at least one microgroup as a part of my weekly schedule. Never do I feel more fulfilled as a pastor than when I am sharing

my life with two or three others who are on an intentional journey to maturity in Christ. Seeing these same partners empowered to disciple others so that multiple generations of Christians are firmly rooted and reproduce is about as good as it gets!

I am excited about the discoveries that lie ahead for you. In the ensuing pages you will learn a simple, reproducible approach to making disciples. This approach is grounded in the biblical model of Jesus and Paul, who intentionally grew followers into responsible, reproducing disciples and disciple makers.

In chapters one and two we will examine the urgency of this issue. Bill Hull has prophetically written, “The crisis at the heart of the church is a crisis of product.”² *Disciple making, discipleship* and *discipling* are hot topics today, because we see such a great need for this focus in our churches. A sign of the felt need for intentional disciple making was the response that occurred the first time I co-taught a course titled “Growing a Disciple-Making Congregation.” Usually it takes some time for new classes to catch on, because students don’t want to be lab rats in new course development. Students usually wait to hear from others how it went. Not so with this class. We had one of our largest classes during my tenure as director of this program. Why? There is an evident discipleship deficit in our churches and ministries that we know needs to be addressed, but we are not sure how to do so.

Chapter one examines the symptoms of the discipleship deficit, while chapter two will attempt to unearth the root causes of these symptoms. The intent of this rather sobering discussion is not to air the church’s dirty laundry or condemn Christian leaders. Who needs more self-flagellation? Yet the first step toward recovering Jesus’ mission statement for the church, “Go and make disciples,” is to evaluate the scope of the need. A sober assessment of the gap between Jesus’ stated end and our practice will define the cost for completing the task. The first two chapters provide tools for you to assess the symptoms and causes of the discipleship deficit in your church or ministry.

In chapters three through five we will explore Jesus’ and Paul’s approaches to making disciples as a guide for our disciple making. In spite of highly readable and insightful works on Jesus’ and Paul’s strategies of

growing followers, Christian leaders do not seem to translate this into workable ministry practice.³ In all of my teaching through seminars and courses on making disciples Jesus' way, I still sense that a small percentage of pastors and church leaders emulate Jesus' and Paul's models. So it is worth asking again, how did transformation take place in those who traveled with Jesus and Paul on their itinerant ministries? Jesus staked the future of his ministry on his investment in a few. Do we do the same? Why did Jesus choose the Twelve and spend so much time with them? If we were to follow this model, what would it look like? Today, we can name those who were trainees and partners in Paul's ministry. What does this say about the way we should carry out our ministry? When we can make evident connections between the scriptural models and our ministry practice, the people of God get the picture in a powerful way.

Once the biblical model of Jesus and Paul has refreshed our theological vision, we will see how the imperative to make disciples a few at a time can become integral to our church- or ministry-based approach. Chapters six through eight will examine three of the critical issues that need to be addressed in any disciple-making strategy. First, disciple making is about *relational investment*. It is walking alongside a few fellow travelers in an intentional journey together over time. You will hear this constant refrain: *Disciple making is not a program but a relationship*.

Second, we rightly associate disciple making with *multiplication*. Yet the promise always seems to far exceed the results. Discipleship programs are sold to us with the promise that disciples will be multiplied through intergenerational transference from life to life. The reality is that we rarely get beyond the first generation. Yet we have not made disciples if we only help people grow to maturity without also seeing them reproduce. I have lived the frustration of not seeing those I have invested in go on to disciple others. I have also witnessed some wonderful breakthroughs of empowerment. I am eager to share these discoveries with you.

Third, making disciples is a *transformative process*. I will identify the convergence of the key ingredients that make transformation of a life by the Holy Spirit possible, as in Eric's case. What ingredients placed Eric's life in the transformative laboratory of the Holy Spirit? When we bring together *transparent relationships* and *the truth of God's Word* in the context

of *covenantal accountability* for life change around a *missional focus*, we have stepped into the Holy Spirit's hot house that makes life change possible.

The three elements of relational investment, multiplication and a transformative process come together powerfully in the model of reproducible microgroups.

In chapter nine we look at the steps necessary for a church- or ministry-based discipling strategy. The following practical questions are addressed: What is a workable disciple-making model? Whom should we invite into the discipling process? How do we get started? How can we grow a multi-generational network of disciples? How do we keep up the motivation for multiplication through the generations?

Finally, in chapter ten we will explore the critical contributions and limitations of preaching in the disciple-making process.

Some of you don't need to be convinced that there is a disciple deficit in your churches; neither do you need to revisit the biblical vision for how disciples are made. You are looking for a practical strategy to make it happen. I will not be offended if you leap over the first two parts of the book and go directly to the last section, which is designed to assist you in practical implementation of a disciple-making strategy.

Since first stumbling on the power of microgroups with Eric and Karl almost three decades ago, I have had the privilege to walk with many others in this life-altering relationship and observe the growth of multi-generational discipling networks in three churches. Over this period I have heard from people across North America and around the world whose lives and ministries have been radically changed because they employed multiplying microgroups. In spite of the enormous discipleship challenge facing the church, I am encouraged by the considerable desire to make disciples. When the urgency for disciple making can be fanned by the vision of the biblical pattern of investing in a few at a time and then translated into a practical strategy, there is the hope that we can truly fulfill Jesus' mission statement for everyone in his church, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

PART ONE

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
DEFICIT

What Went Wrong and Why

THE DISCIPLESHIP GAP

Where Have All the Disciples Gone?



I was intrigued by the cover story of the June 2013 edition of *Christianity Today*, which asked “Does Child Sponsorship Work?”¹ Since my wife and I have sponsored children for forty years and are currently engaged with three different organizations, I had a vested interest in the answer. The author of this article, Bruce Wydick, professor of economics and international studies at the University of San Francisco, was responding to a question he would often get: “What can the ordinary person do to help the poor?” He reflexive response was, “Sponsor a child.” Then he realized that as an economist he had never scientifically tested whether sponsored children were any better off in the long run than unsponsored children. This prompted him to search for a graduate student who would take this on as a PhD project. He found the student, but was surprised with how difficult it was to do the research. When Wydick’s PhD student approached several relief organizations, only one agreed to be evaluated. Even this lone organization would only do so under the condition of anonymity. I frankly was more than miffed when I read this article. I wanted to call up one relief organization I had been with for almost forty years and give them a piece of my mind. What do you mean you don’t want to know whether your organization is actually making a difference?

But then it dawned on me that it requires courage to face the truth about myself or even the churches I have served. Have you ever asked someone for honest feedback, and he or she says to you, “Well, do you want the truth or would you rather I make you feel good?” Everything

in me screams, “Lie and make me feel good!” But once I have settled down, I sheepishly say, “Okay, break it to me gently.”

Bill Hybels, founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, often says, “Facts are your friends.” Willow Creek Church lives up to this motto. Among the many things I admire about them is their desire to live in reality, no matter how painful that may be. In 2004 they did an internal audit, which later became the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey.² It revealed some glaring gaps in their self-image. Ministries and programs they thought were effective were, in fact, ineffective.³ But they had the mettle to allow the truth to provide course corrections.

The State of Discipleship Today: You Are Here!

This chapter is designed to help you do the sober work of finding out where you are. Unless we can see the gap between current reality and our desired destination, we won't be able to assess what it will take to get there. Business leader Max DePree says, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”⁴ Jesus himself commended this approach, saying, “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?” (Luke 14:28 NIV). When I was directing a Doctor of Ministry Program, the counsel I would give students at the final project phase was to spend a considerable amount of time defining the need, challenge or problem they were trying to address. I told them to write, rewrite and write again a one-paragraph summary of their focus until the need they were addressing was crystal clear. Similarly, only as we get the need internalized will we be motivated to marshal the necessary resources to complete the disciple-making call.

Most of us have had the experience of searching for a particular store in a shopping mall. In order to find our desired location, we first look for the mall directory. Once the store is pinpointed on the map, we need to identify where we are in order to plot our course. Usually a red dot marks our location with an arrow and the words “You Are Here.” Only when we know where we are can we see where we are going.

My own one-word summary of our current state of discipleship is *superficial*. Tim Stafford, senior writer for *Christianity Today*, asked the late John Stott how he would evaluate the enormous growth of the

church since he had been ordained sixty-one years earlier. Stott replied, “The answer is ‘growth without depth.’ None of us wants to dispute the extraordinary growth of the church. But it has been largely numerical and statistical growth. And there has not been sufficient growth in discipleship that is comparable to the growth in numbers.”⁵ Having taught internationally in Asia, Central America and Europe, the repeated lament I hear is that we are much better at conversion than we are at transformation of these converts into disciples of Jesus.

This *superficiality* comes into focus when we observe the incongruity between the numbers of people in America who profess faith in Jesus Christ and the lack of impact on the moral and spiritual climate of our times. The Pew Research Center’s 2015 study notes that still 70.6 percent of American population identifies themselves as Christian, with 25.4 percent categorized as evangelical.⁶ The Pew study classifies someone as evangelical if they are member of Pew’s defined list of evangelical denominations or that have identified themselves as “born again” or “evangelical” in their interviews. The Barna Group, an overtly Christian polling organization, comes at these statistics somewhat differently. They make a distinction between “born again” and “evangelical.”⁷ The Barna Group has shown a fairly consistent figure of four out of ten adult Americans who would say they are “born again.” For Barna a person is “born again” if their personal commitment to Christ is currently significant and they believe they will go to heaven based on confession of their sin and trusting in Christ for salvation. And yet with this significant percentage of professed Christ-followers, there is a lot of handwringing among Christian leaders about the spiritual state of American culture. I am suggesting that the lack of Christian influence on culture is a direct result of the lack of depth of transformative discipleship.

Barna has sadly concluded, “My research shows that most Americans who confess their sins to God and ask Christ to be their Savior—live almost indistinguishable from the unrepentant sinners, and their lives bear little, if any fruit, for the kingdom of God.”⁸

To repeat Bill Hull’s prophetic word, “The crisis at the heart of the church today is a crisis of product.”⁹ What kind of followers of Jesus are we producing? How deep is our discipleship deficit?

Before we even consider proposing a solution, we need to do the hard work of self-examination. Before we can get a handle on our ministry, we need to check the directory for the arrow that says, “You Are Here.” To help you do this, I have chosen seven biblical marks of discipleship as the grid for this self-evaluation.¹⁰ With each of these qualities I will sketch the biblical ideal and then examine some indicators of reality we might see within our ministry communities. At the end of each section you have the opportunity to look at your ministry setting through the lens of each of the biblical marks and give yourself a grade on the quality of discipleship you witness among the people you serve. The biblical marks of discipleship are

- Ministers: Passive vs. Proactive
- Christian Life: Casual vs. Disciplined
- Discipleship: Private vs. Holistic
- Culture: Conformed vs. Transformed
- Church: Optional vs. Essential
- Bible: Illiterate vs. Informed
- Witness: Inactive vs. Active

Ministers: Passive versus proactive. The Scripture portrays the church as full of proactive ministers; the reality often is that majority of church members see themselves as passive recipients of the pastor’s ministry.

The New Testament pictures the church as an every-member ministry. The “priesthood of all believers” is not just a Reformation watchword but a biblical ideal. Writing to scattered, persecuted Christians, Peter refers to the church in aggregate when he writes, “You [plural] are . . . a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Every believer comes to God via Christ, their Mediator (vertical dimension), and every believer is enabled to act as a priest on behalf of fellow members of the body of Christ (horizontal dimension). Ministry that is biblically envisioned calls up images not of the paid priests (pastors) hugging ministry to themselves, but views ministry in the hands of ordinary saints. The apostle Paul has the everyday Christian in mind when he writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Playing off the

image of the church as the body of Christ, Paul says that the Holy Spirit has given all believers ministry gifts, and therefore each believer is equivalent to a body part that contributes to the health of the whole. The New Testament describes a full employment plan that dignifies and gives all believers value based on the contribution their gifts make in building up and extending the church.

The reality is that the 80-20 rule applies to many of our congregations.¹¹ Churches fight against the barrier where 20 percent of the people provide ministry for the 80 percent who are recipients, and 20 percent who give 80 percent of the finances. In *The Other 80 Percent*, Scott Thumma and Warren Bird observe that the 80 percent who evidence limited engagement fall into three categories: (1) 10-20 percent of the congregation are declining in participation (often have left a role and no longer feel needed); (2) fully one-third have low or marginal participation levels (these are occasional attenders); (3) the remaining percentage are infrequent attenders who are the long-term prodigal members, often struggling with a particular need that is unknown to the leadership. This is confirmed by the fact that most denominations combined worship attendance averages between 20 and 50 percent of their official membership. Yet the good news from this research shows that when asked, many of 80 percent long to be involved, trained, given responsibility and inspired to Christian service. Churches often do not have the methods in place to engage these who could be drawn in. The church today has been compared to a football game with twenty-two people on the field in desperate need of rest, and fifty thousand people in the stands in desperate need of exercise.

This 80-20 pattern is reinforced by the spectator mentality we have fostered in our “main event,” corporate worship. As a pastor I am consciously aware that people arrive at worship with a reviewer’s mentality. Worshipers believe it’s the responsibility of those on stage to provide an engaging, meaningful and entertaining show, while the worshipers’ role is to give an instant review of the worship service as they pass through the receiving line after worship. We are so used to this pattern that it doesn’t seem odd for people to make evaluative comments like “Good sermon, Pastor” or “I enjoyed the service today.” My favorite evaluation

I received was, “You know, you’re getting better!” (It wasn’t my favorite at the time.) What does this tell us about the dynamic that has been created? It’s a spectator-performer arrangement.

The apostle Paul describes a full-employment plan within the body of Christ. Every member of the body comes to know his or her value through the exercise of spiritual gifts. To the extent that members of the body are not playing their part, the whole body suffers. In congregational surveys the good news is that 68 percent of born-again Christians have heard of spiritual gifts; this is raised to 99 percent for evangelicals, according to Barna. Yet the level of engagement among those who are born again is not encouraging. A full 20 percent of respondents named gifts that had little biblical correlation: sense of humor, singing, patience, a job and so on. “Between those who do not know their gift (15%), those who say they don’t have one (28%) and those who claimed gifts that are not biblical (20%), nearly two-thirds of the self-identified Christian population who claim to have heard about spiritual gifts have not been able to accurately apply whatever they have heard or what the Bible teaches on the subject to their lives.”¹² This would indicate a significant percentage of “unemployed” believers in our ministries.

When you examine your own ministry, what percentage of people do you think could name their spiritual gifts and are exercising them in a context of ministry? Does the 80-20 rule describe your reality, or are you experiencing a breakthrough beyond this limit? Please respond by using figure 1.1.

Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being passive recipients and 5 being proactive ministers.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Ministers: Passive vs. Proactive		

Figure 1.1. Passive versus proactive

Christian Life: Casual versus disciplined. The Scriptures picture followers of Jesus as engaged in a disciplined way of life; the reality is that a small percentage of believers invests in intentional spiritual growth practices.

Great and accomplished athletes perform effortlessly. Having lived for ten years in Chicago, I repeatedly heard stories from Chicagoland residents about the best basketball player ever to grace the hardwood, Michael Jordan. Even though Michael Jordan was endowed by God with remarkable athletic prowess, he did not rely on it. What people did not see was his work ethic. He had the reputation of being the first one in the gym and the last one out.

In the New Testament the discipline of an athlete is one of the consistent images for the Christian life. Comparing the Christian life with a race, Paul writes, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:24-25 NIV). Note Paul’s “how much more” argument for how we are to approach our life in Christ. If athletes put themselves through a rigorous regimen to get a “crown that will not last,” *how much more* should Christians discipline ourselves, because our goal is “a crown that will last forever.” The writer to the Hebrews urges believers to move beyond being milk-drinking infants to adult believers who can take in solid food. Using a similar image of the gymnasium and athletic exertion, the author of Hebrews writes, “But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

Dallas Willard captures this attitude toward training with a pithy phrase: “Grace is opposed to earning, but is not opposed to effort.”¹³ This is why the practices employed to develop our discipleship are called *spiritual disciplines*.

It is common within the evangelical world to urge the practice of personal spiritual disciplines. In the most recent survey on “the state of discipleship” only 20 percent of all Christian adults were involved in one of the following four discipleship activities: (1) Sunday school or fellowship group (43%); (2) spiritual mentor (17%); (3) study the Bible in a group (33%); and (4) reading or discussing a Christian book (25%).¹⁴ In a recent survey only 19 percent of self-identified Christians made daily Scripture reading a habit.¹⁵ Disciplines can also take the form of relational engagements such as a mentoring relationship, a small group or more stringent

intentional discipleship groups. Yet only 21 percent of self-identified Christians believe that “spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith.”¹⁶ Of those who stated that spiritual growth was important to them, 37 percent said they preferred to do it on their own and that their spiritual growth was “entirely private,” meaning they kept it to themselves.¹⁷

Discipline implies intention and a plan of action. According to Barna, fewer than one in five born-again adults have any specific, measurable goals related to their spiritual development. In Barna’s nationwide survey, interviews were conducted with hundreds of people, including pastors and church leaders, who regularly attended church services and programs. Barna concludes, “Not one of the adults we interviewed said that their goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ or to make disciples of the entire world—or even their entire block.”¹⁸ When this group was asked what they wanted to accomplish in life, eight out of ten believers found success in family, career development and financial achievement. This is hardly distinguishable from the American dream. Dallas Willard observes, “The fact is that there is now lacking a serious and expectant intention to bring Jesus’ people into obedience and abundance through training.”¹⁹

As you observe your congregation, where would you place your people on the casual-versus-disciplined spectrum? Please respond by using figure 1.2.

Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being spiritually casual and 5 being spiritually disciplined.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Christian Life: Casual vs. Disciplined		

Figure 1.2. Casual versus disciplined

Discipleship: Private versus holistic. The Scriptures picture discipleship as affecting all spheres of life; the reality is that many believers have relegated faith to the personal, private realm.

The dominant theme of Jesus’ public ministry was the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God. The future, long-awaited

kingdom, where the rule and reign of God will be actualized on earth, had broken into the present darkness in the person of the King, Jesus Christ. The promise is that those who “repent and believe” the gospel (Mark 1:15) are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). A new authority is established in the hearts of Jesus’ followers. The motif of the kingdom is that there is not a scintilla of life that does not come under the authority of Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, we are kingdom people, which means that Jesus is Lord in our hearts, homes and workplaces; our attitudes, thoughts and desires; our relationships and moral decisions; our political convictions and social conscience. In every area of our interior life, personal relationships or social involvement, we seek to know and live the mind and will of God.

Yet the reality is that we suffer today from the same bifurcated existence that Martin Luther addressed five hundred years ago with Reformation force. In writing his *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, Luther said that the first barrier erected by the Roman Catholic Church was a false distinction between what he called the “spiritual estate” and “temporal estate.”²⁰ In Luther’s day the spiritual estate was the realm of the Church and its holy orders, which took precedence over and elevated itself above the temporal estate, which was the realm of government and the common life. Luther attempted to break down the wall between the sacred and secular, declaring that in kingdom terms everything is sacred. The dividing line is not between sacred and secular but between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

Yet it appears that we still suffer under the false notion that the religious or sacred realm is relegated to a private sphere, which consists of church, family and the interior life. When a believer moves into the social, secular realm, it is as if an entirely different set of assumptions are adopted. Personal faith is often minimized in the workplace, in determining our political convictions and in the way we view other social institutions that govern public life (for example, economics, education and media). Os Guinness summarizes this disconnect between personal faith and the totality of life by saying that our faith is “privately engaging but socially irrelevant.”²¹

There is a disconnect between our faith and the workplace. Few people understand the faith-workplace dynamic the way one of my friends does: “I am a disciple of Jesus masquerading as a furniture salesman.” Sure his job is to sell furniture, but his calling is to follow Jesus in all that he does. William Diehl, formerly an executive with Bethlehem Steel and a strong proponent of Christian witness and service in the workplace, writes these words of frustration that unfortunately are all too common,

In almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to improve those skills, which could make me a better minister, nor has it ever asked if I need any kind of support in what I am doing. There never has been an enquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of my ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church doesn't have the least interest whether or how I minister in my daily work.²²

How would you assess the view of discipleship among those you rub elbows with? Is faith relegated to a private, interior realm, or do you sense that faith in Christ is allowed to seep into all aspects of life? Please respond by using figure 1.3.

Rate your view of discipleship on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being private (limited to personal realms) and 5 being holistic (encompassing all of life).		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Discipleship: Private vs. Holistic		

Figure 1.3. Private versus holistic

Church: Conformed versus transformed. The Scriptures picture the Christian community as a countercultural force; the reality is that we see isolated individuals whose lifestyle and values are not much different from those of the unchurched.

John Stott has described the church of the Lord's intention as a community of "radical nonconformity" or a "contrast society." These phrases are a helpful summary of some of the biblical metaphors for the church. The images of "alien," "exile" and "sojourner" capture the relationship of believers to this present world (1 Peter 2:11). This sentiment is expressed in the words of the old hymn "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through."²³ The church in the biblical scheme is a body whose collective lifestyle forms a countercultural alternative to the values of the dominant society.

The apostle Peter gave us a word picture for this new reality when he addressed the church dispersed across the landscape of the Greco-Roman world. Though these believers in Jesus did not have a land to call their own, he could still say to them, "You are . . . a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). By using this image Peter was saying, "You are a people who cut across all geopolitical boundaries, because you are a church without borders." To be holy is to be a called-out people, meaning separate or different. One of the distinguishing features of this new kingdom people is their lifestyle of compassionate and costly service. Echoing Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16), Peter says, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Peter 2:12). Those hostile to the church may not affirm what we believe, but they can't argue against the way we live.

If this was true then, what might people observe about the church in our day? Too often when it comes to moral values or lifestyle choices the church and the unchurched appear almost indistinguishable. Ron Sider introduces his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* with this devastating summary: "Whether the issue is divorce, materialism, sexual promiscuity, racism, physical abuse in marriage, or neglect of biblical worldview, the polling data point to widespread, blatant disobedience of clear biblical moral demands on the part of people who allegedly are evangelical, born-again Christians."²⁴ It would appear that Christians have been almost as seduced by self-focus as the broader population. Eighty-four percent of adults and 66 percent of Christians agreed that "the highest goal in life is to enjoy it as much as possible." In addition, 91 percent of adults and 76 percent of Christians believe that

“the best way to find yourself is to look inside yourself.” David Kinnaman concludes that “if we peel back the layers, many Christians are using the Way of Jesus as a means to pursuing the Way of Self.”²⁵

If the church is intended to be a “contrast society,” then it needs to shape and instill the values of the kingdom in the set-apart people. This requires a church culture with a clear disciple-making agenda supported by a covenantal mentality. Yet increasingly this reality has been undermined by radical individualism. Being a part of a covenantal community is countered by the American ideal of independence. Each person keeps his or her own counsel and determines his or her own beliefs. Eighty-one percent of the American people said they are able to arrive at their own religious views without regard to a body of believers.²⁶ The idea of being accountable to a group of Christ-followers—to whom we give permission to keep us faithful to our commitments and disciplines—seems all too rare. How can we possibly build countercultural communities out of such porous material?

How would you assess the lifestyles of the believers in your network of relationships? Does it appear that there is little difference in values and priorities from the dominant society, or do you see your fellow believers as lights shining in the darkness? Please respond by using figure 1.4.

Rate your church community on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 conformed to this world and 5 being transformed into contrast society.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Church: Conformed vs. Transformed		

Figure 1.4. Conformed versus transformed

Church: Optional versus essential. The Scriptures picture the church as an essential, chosen organism in whom Christ dwells; the reality is that people view the church as an optional institution, unnecessary for discipleship.

The church of Jesus Christ is nothing less than his corporate replacement on earth. Jesus continues his incarnation by dwelling in his people. The late Ray Stedman succinctly described Christ’s relationship to the church: “The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place

on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church.”²⁷ The apostle Paul’s favorite and most fundamental image for the church is that of the body of Christ. When Paul uses this term, it is far more than a nice word picture or metaphor. He is not saying that the church is *like* the body of Christ but that it literally *is* the body of Christ. This is the place where Christ continues to dwell.

The implication is that the church is not an optional afterthought for those who name Christ as their Lord. The church is central to God’s plan of salvation. God saves people into a new community, which is the vanguard of a new humanity. To be called to Christ is to throw one’s lot in with his people. Many people today like to say, “Jesus, yes; church, no.” To do so is a fundamental misunderstanding of the place the church has in God’s grand scheme of salvation. To be a follower of Christ is to understand that there is no such thing as solo discipleship.

Yet it appears that in our communication of the gospel we have separated following Christ from the necessity of being integrally involved in a church community. David Platt describes an evangelistic event where the preacher was driving to a conclusion, crafting his call to decision. “Tonight, I want to call you to put your faith in God. I am urging you to begin a personal relationship with Jesus. But let me be clear. I’m not inviting you to join the church. I’m inviting you to come to Christ.”²⁸ Implicit in this invitation was that you might be able to carry on a relationship with Christ apart from the church. Apparently this preacher’s perspective is shared by a significant number of Christians as well. In response to the statement “You cannot become a complete and mature person unless you belong to a community of faith that influences you,” only 18 percent strongly agreed with this statement.²⁹

We are a nation of church shoppers. Joshua Harris says that we have adopted a “dating the church” mentality. Dating means we keep our options open. Though we are in this relationship now, we keep scouring the horizon to see if something better may come along. We don’t want to close off our options and make a covenantal commitment. Our current relationship with a church is based on whether it meets our needs or checks the boxes of what we are looking for in a church. The implication is if things change, then we can make a change as well. Christian leaders

live with the tension of serving a community of people with a tenuous commitment. How can you call people to the discipline of discipleship if they can so easily walk? Juan Carlos Ortiz observes that we could not be effective parents if our children could decide they were going to become a part of another family if they didn't like the discipline in the home.³⁰ Unless a commitment to a church community is similar to the covenant of marriage, how can people be formed into Christlike disciples?

How would you assess people's understanding of the church in God's grand scheme? Is the church simply a helpful option, or is it viewed as central to God's plan of salvation? Please respond by using figure 1.5.

Rate the commitment to the church as a covenant community on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being optional and 5 being essential.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Church: Optional vs. Essential		

Figure 1.5. Optional versus essential

Bible: Illiterate versus informed. Followers of Christ are often called “the people of the book” because we believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the unique written revelation of God; the reality is that believers’ knowledge of Scripture is woefully inadequate.

The Bible is the trustworthy depository of God’s self-revelation to humanity. We look to Scripture as “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” In other words, if we want to know God’s mind on how to live, this is what we base our life on. Scripture is the record of God’s unfolding story in history, the witness to the nature of his character, and how we obtain that which is “able to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15 NIV). We look to Scripture to give us the most reliable answers to these worldview questions: (1) How did our world come to be? (2) Why are we here? (3) What went wrong? (4) How can it be made right? (5) Where is it all going? We preach the Scripture from the pulpit, make it the center of our small group discoveries and include it as part of our daily spiritual diet because the Bible is to the soul what food is to our bodies.

Americans have a high view of Scripture. Almost 50 percent believe that Scripture contains everything a person needs to lead a meaningful life. Almost 60 percent believe that the Bible has had the most impact on history. From a list of words to describe the Bible, the word *inspired* far exceeds any other option. When Americans are asked to name a sacred text, 79 percent say the Bible, which is eight times more than any other sacred text, such as the Koran.³¹

Yet with all these lofty claims, the Bible is far more revered than it is read. Only 14 percent read the Bible on a daily basis, and another 14 percent several times a week. Just 12 percent consider themselves highly knowledgeable of the Bible. The reality of people's biblical knowledge is far different from what we say we believe about it. Kenneth Berding, New Testament professor at Talbot School of Theology, says,

All the research indicates that biblical literacy in America is at an all-time low. My own experience of teaching a class of new college freshmen every year for the past fifteen years suggests to me that although students fifteen years ago knew little about the Bible upon entering my classes, today's students on average know even less about the Bible.³²

Only 43 percent from the "State of the Bible 2015" study could name the first five books of the Bible, and about the same percentage thought that John the Baptist was one of the apostles. Only about 25 percent could recognize Jesus' affirmation "the truth shall set you free" as a quote from Scripture. Sometimes this misinformation can be somewhat humorous. Berding recalls a student who did not realize that King Saul of the Old Testament was different from Saul, later Paul, in the New Testament. Another student referenced Joshua, the son of a nun, not aware that "Nun" referred to Joshua's father, not a Roman Catholic community of women.

The concern this raises, as Berding highlights, is that there is a famine of God's Word even in the church; we are starving ourselves to death. Instead of following the admonition to meditate on God's law day and night (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 119:97), we take a haphazard approach to internalizing the Word in our lives. Through prophet Amos the Lord warns,

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD,
 “when I will send a famine through the land—
 not a famine of food or a thirst for water,
 but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.” (Amos 8:11 NIV)

In Amos’s era God was going to withhold the word, but in our time we have unlimited access and yet are starving ourselves to death.

How would you assess the place of Scripture in the daily diet of the fellow believers you know? Please respond by using figure 1.6.

Rate your ministry on the extent of the knowledge of God’s Word on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being illiterate and 5 informed.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Bible: Illiterate vs. Informed		

Figure 1.6. Illiterate versus informed

Witness: Inactive versus active. The Scriptures picture all believers as those who share the story of their faith in Christ with others; the reality is that a relatively small percentage of believers make it their intention to do so.

We are storytellers. The Bible spins a love story of God’s pursuit of wayward humanity. Those of us captured by Jesus Christ have a story to tell of how God chased us down and embraced us in his loving arms. In so doing, the Lord has included us as characters in his grand redemptive drama. We each have an assigned part to play on the stage of history, which is the realm in which God writes his story. This story makes sense of why we are here. As unique as each of us is, there is a common story line written into the script for each of our lives. “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus says (Acts 1:8). We each have our story and *the* story to tell, for as we share our story and *the* story, others find that they too have been written into this redemptive drama. Paul could not be clearer about the privilege we have when he wrote that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). God has entrusted us with the story of the visited planet, and telling it is the means he uses to melt human hearts.

How are we doing in telling the story? The picture here is somewhat unclear. When born again Christians are asked if they have a personal responsibility to share their faith in Christ, 73 percent say they do. Fifty-two percent of born again Christians followed through on this responsibility by sharing the gospel at least once over the last year with the hope that the person would come to faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. The Barna Group reports the not-so-good news that boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and busters (now in their thirties and forties) have declined over the years in their practice of sharing their faith. The one major exception, perhaps surprisingly, are those of the millennial generation (approximately eighteen to thirty-four years old), who have had a significant increase in faith-sharing practices (from 56 percent in 2010 to 65 percent in 2013). It is surmised that since the percentage of millennials who are overtly Christian is significantly smaller than the older generations, they are more motivated to make a case for their faith.³³ In another study only 25 percent of believers could affirm the statement that they had “spent time building friendships with non-Christians for the purpose of sharing Christ with them.” In addition, only 1 percent of Christ-followers believe they have the gift of evangelism, which reflects the static growth of the church in America.

We must acknowledge that the climate in the Western world makes any traditional form of sharing the gospel more difficult than in the recent past. It can be intimidating to live at a time when the spirit of relativism reigns. Relativism is the belief that there is no absolute truth. The only truth we have is personal truth or what is true for me. This is what I would call designer truth or religion. We each pick and choose from the salad bar of options according to our personal taste. Nothing is right or wrong; what matters is what works for us. Christians can be suspect because we speak of Jesus as *the* truth; he is true for all. We can be readily accused of trying to force our beliefs on others in a culture of maximum choice. Standing for a universal truth can come across as being intolerant and judgmental. When the force of culture is flowing powerfully in one direction, and we are going upstream, it takes deep conviction to not get swept away in the prevailing current. Many times people have pushed back at me with, “You mean to tell me if I don’t

accept Christ I am going to hell?” Generally, I have swallowed hard and said something to the effect, “If God has made his identity known to all through Jesus Christ, wouldn’t you think I should let you know about that?”

In this atmosphere of intimidation, we must ask ourselves what we have to offer. Do we truly believe we have something so vital and life giving that we must give it away? Do we want others to have the same fulfilling relationship with God as we do? Pastor Bill Hybels says that seekers might look at our lives and ask themselves, “If I become a Christian, am I trading up or trading down?” So the question becomes, is our experience of the love and joy of Jesus worth transmitting to others? For many believers, it appears not to be so.

How would you assess both the capacity and willingness of fellow believers to share the good news of Jesus with others? Please respond by using figure 1.7.

Rate the commitment to the church as a covenant community on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being optional and 5 being essential.		
Discipleship Symptom	Rating	Notes
Witness: Inactive vs. Active		

Figure 1.7. Inactive versus active

The Discipleship Gap: You Are Here

Is this overview an accurate picture of the state of discipleship today? Is it overly dire? Does this portrait accord with your reality? If this description of the gap between the biblical standard and the current state of discipleship is close to being accurate, then enormous work must be done to close the gap.

My goal in this chapter has been to bring into stark contrast the current state of discipleship. Leaders must speak to this gap. John Kotter in *Leading Change* says that a primary reason why change does not occur is that there is no sense of urgency.³⁴ Leadership is about instilling urgency. One way urgency is created is by painting a picture of God’s in-

tention over against the sober reality we are living in.

When we accurately assess the way things are, we have hope of getting to the way things were designed to be. We have hope because Jesus, the Lord of the church, desires his bride to be without spot and blemish, for his life will be manifest through his church. Barna observes,

Christianity would be incredibly influential in our culture if Christians consistently lived their faith. Most non-Christians don't read the Bible, so they judge Christianity by the lives of the Christians they see. The problem is that millions of Christians don't live like Christians—and that's partially because they don't know what they believe and therefore cannot apply appropriate scriptural values to their lives.³⁵

How have we gotten to this state of discipleship? It is one thing to describe where we are; it is another to identify the root causes of the problem. In chapter two I will complete our portrait of reality by identifying the contributing factors to the current state of discipleship. Only when we know and face the causes of our low level of discipleship can we begin to address them.

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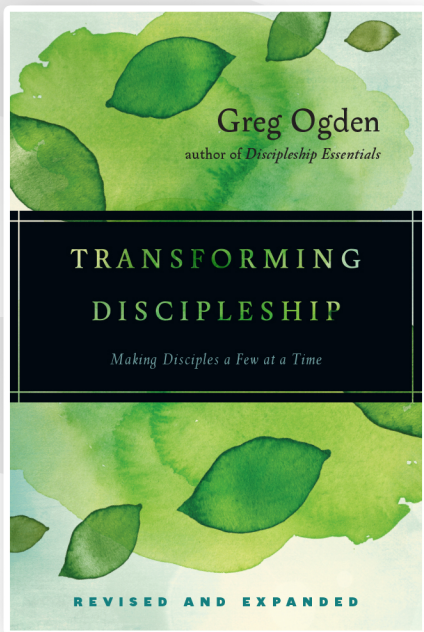
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