

MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING

4

Whose Job Is It?

The Responsibility for Making Disciples

So far each chapter has addressed a crucial, preparatory question in the disciple making process. The question in this chapter is, Where does the responsibility for disciple making rest? In short, who makes disciples? I believe that the responsibility for disciple making falls in three domains. In order of importance, they are God, the individual disciple or Christian, and the local church.

God's Responsibility

First, and the most important of those responsible for making disciples, is God. So we must ask, where is God in the process? What is his role in disciple making?

If God is not involved in the process of disciple making, it will not happen. That's how essential his role is. Some hold the view that disciple making is all up to God. Their philosophy is "let go and let God." Those who subscribe to this view believe that the primary problem to seeing things accomplished for God is that far too often his people get in the way. Thus the solution is for us to "let go" in our futile efforts to serve the Savior and "let God" do his work. These people would encourage us to get out of God's way and watch God do his work of discipleship.

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Another view goes to the opposite extreme. It places most of the responsibility on God's people to get God's work done. The idea is that while God wants to accomplish his plans, he wants to do so mostly through believers. People who hold this view may virtually move God out of the picture. This is a form of deism—

believing that God created the heavens and earth and then deserted them, leaving them to operate on their own.

While there may be some truth in both positions, the biblical truth lies somewhere in the middle. Scripture affirms that God has not abandoned his people, and in the form of the Godhead, all three members of the Trinity are involved in the disciplining process.

God the Father

In 1 Corinthians 3:5–7 Paul clarifies the roles that God and his people play in growing his church. He writes, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

We must note that each plays a role in the process. None can be left out. Paul writes that his role was to plant the seed of faith, and Apollos’s role was to water it. But God’s role was to cause it to grow. Thus all are involved in some way, but God’s role is essential to the process.

It is important to observe here that Paul uses a plant metaphor to get his point across. Those of us who are weekend gardeners can identify quickly with this illustration. I am one of those rare individuals who likes to work in his yard. There is something special to planting grass in bare spots, trimming bushes, and coordinating various colored plants with one another. All these things I can and should do if I want to have a healthy, attractive yard, yet I cannot make my grass and bushes grow. I am totally dependent on God “who makes things grow.”

Another passage that spells out God’s part and man’s part is Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.” Using a war metaphor that most Israelites would understand, the writer states that our role is to make sure the horse is ready when it is time to go into battle. All good military people understand that you do not go into battle unprepared. However, regardless of our preparation or the lack thereof, we must understand that it is God, and not we, who gives the victory. Thus we have an important role, and he has an even

more important key role. The same is true in the disciple-making process. God makes his people grow.

God the Son

In Matthew 16, in response to Jesus's question, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Then after Jesus pronounced a blessing on Peter, he used a building metaphor to teach about his church: "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18). When Jesus speaks of building his church, it is not a reference to a literal building or, as some profess, the Roman Catholic Church. It is a reference to making disciples (seeing people come to faith in Christ and then grow in their faith). Jesus is still at work building his church in the twenty-first century, as he was in the first century when he uttered these words. Without him there would be no church.

Some who are aware of the tremendous struggles that the church is facing in the twenty-first century might be tempted by this passage to ask what has happened to this church that Jesus said he is building. Recently, at a pastors' conference, I heard Tony Evans—author, Bible conference speaker, and pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas—address this problem. His answer is that maybe today's struggling churches are not Christ's church but someone else's church.

God the Holy Spirit

In 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 Paul asserts that should he need some kind of recommendation, his ministry to the church at Corinth was his letter of recommendation. Then he says, "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant" (vv. 4–6). Here Paul is making sure that God gets the credit for Paul's ministry at Corinth. Yet at the same time he acknowledges his part in the process, calling other ministers and himself "competent as ministers of a new covenant."

Next, 2 Corinthians 3:17–18 captures best God's role and work in the discipleship (Christian growth) process. Paul says to the church at Corinth, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness

with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Paul makes it crystal clear that God the Holy Spirit is the one who is in the transformation business, not believers. And the Spirit’s work of discipleship in the church is to transform the Corinthians back then and us now into Christ’s likeness. As we are progressively being transformed by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s likeness, we show forth the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) in our lives. This is the ultimate goal of our discipleship process—to follow and become like Christ.

The Disciple’s Responsibility

Each Christian is responsible for his or her own development as a disciple of Christ. While the Godhead is involved in making disciples, we can still resist those efforts and thus circumvent the process. This involves the freedom of man’s will. There are several theological positions on the freedom of the human will to make decisions that affect one’s life. I suspect that in light of the ravages of sin, most would agree that man does not have a will that is completely and totally free. Sin has affected all of us to some degree. Still, various theologians argue different positions on the extent of the freedom of the human will. Some believe that man has little or no freedom, while others argue for a limited freedom.

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The Disciple

It is not the purpose of this book or this chapter to solve this thorny theological debate. Regardless of where one stands on the issue, all or most would agree that God holds people responsible for their decisions, whether they are believers or unbelievers. An example would be Israel’s refusal to obey and honor God. Jesus says in Matthew 23:37: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing*” (italics

mine). Here we see what God was willing or longing to do for the people and how they resisted his efforts. He was willing, but they were not.

Scripture teaches clearly that the disciple or Christian can resist God due to sin. Jesus died and thus paid for our sins on the cross, but that does not mean that we are free from sin. We are free from the penalty of but not the power of sin in our lives. Through his death on the cross, Jesus broke the reigning power of sin over our lives. Thus the answer to Paul's question for the believer in Romans 6:1, "Shall we go on sinning?" is no. Paul goes on to explain in verse 6 that when Christ died, our old self was crucified with him so that we would no longer have to serve sin. That is the upside of discipleship. And there is a downside. We can choose to continue to serve sin. Thus Paul appeals to us in verses 12–14 to present ourselves to God as instruments of his righteousness. And he says much the same in Romans 12:1, where he urges us to offer our bodies "as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." That is how we serve God and not sin.

The New Testament includes many passages that instruct the disciple on how to live in a way that honors God. And many of them are commands that imply that a disciple can choose to disobey as well as obey. Therefore, Scripture clearly holds each disciple responsible for the pursuit of the discipleship process in his or her life. No disciple will be able to arrive at the end of life and say that he or she wanted to grow to maturity but did not have a choice in the matter.

I am convinced that one of the great problems facing today's churches in growing disciples is that too few disciples are taking personal responsibility for their own spiritual growth and development. Willow Creek Community Church discovered this when they surveyed their congregation. People are depending on the church and its ministries to accomplish this for them. And many churches tend to believe that this is totally their responsibility to their people! The problem is that when it does not happen, who gets the blame? It is the church and not the disciple.

Churches need to understand and accept their role in training disciples, as covered in the next section, and then teach their people to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth. You will find in the next section that the church's disciple-making responsibility is to come alongside and complement what each person is doing personally to grow and mature in the faith.

Since it is imperative that each Christian and member of a church have a plan for personal spiritual development, what might such a plan look like? This broaches the topic of the doctrine of sanctification. The problem is that there are many views as to how a believer is sanctified or matures in his or her faith. It depends on one's theology. Consequently, much of the following depends on the leadership of the church and their theology of sanctification. I believe that most leaders would agree that the following elements should be included in a personal plan of discipleship: Bible reading, individual worship, prayer, serving, stewardship or generosity, loving people, evangelism, and spiritual disciplines such as solitude, confession of sin, meditation, and simplicity. At the very end of chapter 6, I discuss some practical ways for a church to implement such a plan for individual discipleship.

The Church's Responsibility

Finally, not only does the Godhead and each disciple have responsibility for making disciples, but the church has a part as well. Here I want to make a distinction between the responsibility of each disciple for his or her own discipleship and the church's responsibility in making disciples. Whereas each individual is responsible for making a choice as to whether he or she will be a growing disciple, the church as a body is responsible for helping its people grow as disciples. The role of the disciple in deciding is personal and individual. The role of the church in deciding for others is public and corporate. It is this last emphasis that I want to develop here. The latter assumes and builds on the former. The church can provide a process of discipleship only for those individuals who are willing to be a part of such a process, whether they are many or few. The church is to come alongside and help. Perhaps Home Depot's slogan articulates it best: "You can do it, and we can help!"

The Role of the Disciple—personal and individual

The Role of the Church—public and corporate

Making Disciples

According to Matthew 28:19–20, the church as the body of Christ is to play a major role in making disciples. Jesus addresses this passage to the disciples, as both disciples and apostles. Wilkins comments:

Although the Twelve were both disciples and apostles, scholars agree that the terms *disciple* and *apostle* point to significantly different aspects. Indeed, while in the Gospels the Twelve are almost always called disciples, in the book of Acts the Twelve are never called disciples. In Acts they are only called apostles, to emphasize their leadership role in the early church.

Thus Jesus directs this passage not only to the disciples as future founding members and examples to the church but to the apostles as the key leaders of the coming church. There is no doubt the Great Commission is for the church and not just the disciples, as some argue.

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The Disciple

The Church

Jesus clearly and expressly commanded the apostles as leaders of the church to set the example and make disciples. They are to make more of what the Savior had made of them. It is a call to spiritual reproduction. To accomplish this commission, each church needs to develop its own unique process of disciple making and communicate this to its people. It is imperative that everyone in the church know and understand the church's process for making disciples (evangelism) and maturing them (sanctification). And this is the reason I developed the Maturity Matrix (see p. 96) to help the church accomplish this task.

The Body of Christ

Nowhere does the Bible encourage “lone ranger” Christians. As the church, we need one another. Discipleship is a group process, involving all the body of Christ. We cannot grow and mature alone.

While I will argue that all believers need the body, I do realize that many in the body are not convinced of this. Barna writes:

Fewer than one out of every five adults firmly believes that a congregational church is a critical element in their spiritual growth.... Only 17% of adults said that “a person’s faith is meant to be developed by involvement in a local church.” Even evangelicals and born-again Christians generally dismissed that notion: only one-third of all evangelicals ... endorsed the concept.

I have assumed in the past that those who drop out of church are mostly unbelievers or carnal Christians. Barna states that, while some are carnal Christians, a growing proportion (perhaps the majority) are deeply committed believers who leave their churches because they want more of God but are not getting it in their local church. When Willow Creek Community Church surveyed their congregation, they discovered much the same. The segment of their spiritual continuum that consists of the most mature people in the church reported, “My faith is central to my life and I’m trying to grow, but my church is letting me down.”⁵

What a sad commentary on churches in North America! Apparently far too many are proving a detriment to discipleship. It is most likely that such caustic churches do more harm than good to the faith of their congregations. Regardless, though healthy churches have become fewer in number over the past few years, we must not overlook the fact that there are many still out there. This simply becomes another argument for planting growing, healthy, vibrant churches that cultivate their disciples as well as for revitalizing unhealthy churches to the point that they begin to cultivate disciples.

Not only is the church to make disciples, but in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 Paul makes the strongest of arguments that we need the church—the body of Christ—for this to happen. Individually we are responsible for our own spiritual growth, but the church can and is to help. Embracing the metaphor of the human body to make his

point, he says that each believer is a specific body part, such as the foot, the hand, the ear, and the eye. Then in verses 21–23, he writes:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty.

Why does Paul make this argument? Why do we need other believers who make up the local body of Christ? The reason is found in the “one another” passages spread across several New Testament Epistles. There are some fifty such biblical references, many of which encourage believers to love one another (Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11). I would also include under the love grouping the passages that encourage the church to greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12). The key to understanding what these mean is the exhortation found in 1 Peter 5:14 where Peter writes: “Greet one another with a kiss of love.” It is a physical way of showing or expressing love for one another in the body.

Here is a sampling of the “one another” passages:

Honor one another (Rom. 12:10).

Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16).

Let us stop passing judgment on one another (Rom. 14:13).

Accept one another (Rom. 15:7).

Wait for each other (1 Cor. 11:33).

Have equal concern for each other (1 Cor. 12:25).

Serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another (Gal. 5:26).

Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Eph. 4:2).

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other (Eph. 4:32).

Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).

Do not lie to each other (Col. 3:9).

Bear with each other (Col. 3:13).

Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Col. 3:16).

Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:25).

Build each other up (1 Thess. 5:11).

Encourage one another daily (Heb. 3:13).

Spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

Do not slander one another (James 4:11).

Don't grumble against each other (James 5:9).

Confess your sins to each other (James 5:16).

Pray for each other (James 5:16).

Live in harmony with one another (1 Peter 3:8).

Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9).

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5).

Paul and other writers place a strong emphasis on the "love one another" passages (at least eleven references). And the other "one another" passages above are telling us how to love each other in the church. The point is that all believers need the body and need to be loved by that body if discipleship is to occur. Where else in this world will we find such love that is so vital to our spiritual and emotional health as developing, maturing disciples of Christ?

Consequently, the answer to the problem of weak churches that are not implementing or following Christ's command to make disciples is not to abandon the church, as many seem to be doing. This is unbiblical. The answer, instead, is to plant disciple-making churches and do everything within our power as church leaders to revitalize struggling churches.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The author believes that God, the individual believer, and the church are all responsible for making disciples in obedience to the Great Commission. Do you agree? Why or why not? Can you think of any other entity that might have a role in making disciples? If so, who or what?

2. What is God's role in making disciples? How does his role work with our role? Does he expect us to do it all? Should we expect him to do it all—are we to “let go and let God”? Why or why not?

3. What is our role as disciples and believers in seeing that we become mature disciples? How much responsibility do we have in the process? If we have opportunity and do not follow through, who is to blame?

4. What is the church's role in making disciples? Does your church have a carefully thought-through disciple-making process? Why or why not? If so, does the congregation know and understand what it is? If not, what do you plan to do about this?

5. Do you believe that individual believers really need the church as the loving body of Christ? Why or why not? Do you need the church in your life? Why or why not?¹

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, [*Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 37–45.