

HOW THE CHURCH TODAY IS GETTING DISCIPLESHIP WRONG

By [Carey Nieuwhof](#) | 164

One of the ways you know you're making progress is that you stop having the same discussion over and over again.

If you're discussing the same issues on your team or at home year after year, you're probably stuck.

When it comes to much of the discussion around discipleship, I believe we're getting it wrong in the church.

We're stuck.

What if the popular understanding of discipleship is producing some of the ill-health and even stagnation and decline we see all around us in the church?

And what if you could do something about it by rethinking what you mean by discipleship?

Different Day, Same Conversation

From my earliest days in ministry, I've had a conversation about discipleship that repeats itself again and again.

It goes like something like this:

Me: People need to reach out more and focus more of their time, energy, and resources on evangelism.

Other person(s): That's a great idea but what we really need to focus on is ***discipleship***. There's such an immaturity in Christians today that we need to focus on growing the ones we have first. And besides, evangelical churches are known for producing shallow, immature Christians.

Pretty compelling logic.

Unless, of course, it's wrong.

Flabby Christians

I agree that often Christians in the West are immature. I agree our walk doesn't always match our talk.

But I also think the average North American Christian is about 3000 bible verses overweight.

The way many leaders approach maturity is to assume that *knowledge* produces *maturity*. Since when?

It's wonderful that people understand what they believe, but knowledge in and of itself is not a hallmark of Christian maturity. As [Paul says](#), knowledge puffs up. Love, by contrast, builds up. And some of the most biblically literate people in Jesus' day got by-passed as disciples.

The goal is not to know, but to *do* something with what you know. I wrote more on [why our definition of Christian maturity needs to change here](#).

7 Truths About Authentic Discipleship

Here are seven things I believe are true about biblical discipleship church leaders today should reclaim:

1. Jesus Commanded Us To *Make* Disciples, Not *Be* Disciples.

The way many Christians talk, you'd think Jesus told us to *be* disciples. He commanded us to *make* disciples. The great commission is, at its heart, an *outward* movement.

Could it be that in the act of making disciples, we actually become more of who Christ designed us to be? It was in the act of sharing faith that thousands of early Christians were transformed into new creations.

I know personally I grow most and learn most when I am helping others. It gives me a place to apply what I'm learning and to take the focus off myself and place it on Christ and others, where it belongs.

2. Discipleship Is Simply Linked To Evangelism.

The thrust of all first-century discipleship was to share Christ with the world he loves and died for (yes, [Jesus really does love the world](#)).

You can't be a disciple without being an evangelist.

And for sure, the opposite is true. You can't be an evangelist without being a disciple. But somehow many many people would rather be disciples without being evangelists.

3. A Mark Of An Authentic Disciple Includes Getting It Wrong.

A common criticism of churches that draw in large numbers of outsiders and newer believers is that these new followers of Christ get it wrong as often as they get it right. They might not realize that reincarnation isn't biblical or struggle to understand the faith they're stepping into.

What if that's a sign that their discipleship is authentic?

After all, Peter didn't get it right most of the time when he was around Jesus. Many leaders in the early church needed correction. And even [Paul would later confront Peter](#) about his unwillingness to eat with Gentiles. And yet Christ chose to build the early church on Peter and Paul. Imagine that.

4. A Morally Messy Church Is...Inevitable

One stinging criticism of churches that are reaching people is that many of their attendees don't bear much resemblance to Jesus.

These new, immature Christians can be

swayed by powerful personalities

still be sexually active outside of marriage

have questionable business practices

end up in broken families

be too swayed by the culture

not know how to conduct themselves in worship

doubt core doctrines like the resurrection

If these issues remind you of why you so dislike growing churches or megachurches, just realize that I pulled every one of those problems out of 1 Corinthians. The church in Corinth struggled with *every* problem listed above and (I think) every problem growing churches today struggle with.

And last time I checked the church in Corinth was an authentic church Christ loved.

The fact that you have these problems may actually be a sign you're making progress with the unchurched. You don't want to leave them there, but when people really start engaging with Christ, tidy categories are hard to come by.

In fact the most morally 'pure' people of the first century (the Pharisees) were the very ones Jesus most often condemned. Go figure.

5. Maturity Takes Time And Is Not Linear

It would be great if there was instant maturity in faith and in life. But it never works that way.

You can't expect a 3-year-old to have the maturity of a 13 year old, or expect a 23 year old to have the maturity of a 43 year old. When you place expectations on people that they are just not able to bear, you crush or confuse them.

And yet we do that in the church all the time. People grow and mature over time. And our progress isn't always as linear as a

101, 201, 301 progressions would make it. In fact, I know some 23-year-olds who are more mature than some 43-year-olds.

Expose new Christians to the love of God and community, to great teaching, great relationships, and solid accountability and over time, many will grow into very different people than they were when they first came to Christ. They may grow at different rates and in different measures, but I believe Jesus [talked about that](#). Just don't judge them after a few months or even a few years.

6. Christian Maturity Was Never About You Anyway.

Christian maturity has never been about you anyway. It is certainly not about how awesome you are compared to others, how smart you are, how righteous you are, or how holy you are.

It is about Jesus. And it is about others.

It was never about you anyway.

7. Love Compels Us

If you love the world, how can you ignore it? Jesus said the [authentic mark of his followers is love](#). He defined the primary relationship [between God and humanity as one of love](#). The truth he ushered in is [inseparable from love](#).

The primary motivation for evangelism and discipleship [is the same](#); it is love. That should characterize both the discussion about evangelism and discipleship and also the way we go about both.

This isn't an exhaustive treatment of discipleship and evangelism, but in the time it takes to sip a coffee I hope it helps in some way advance the conversation about evangelism and discipleship in your church.

And if we advanced our understanding of discipleship in the church, maybe the church and our culture would be transformed.