CULTURAL BASED DISCIPLING ACCORDING TO THE STRATEGIES OF JESUS

A Thesis Project submitted to
The Faculty of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry
Liberty University School of Divinity

By

JONATHAN ERIC SMITH

Lynchburg, Virginia
April 2018
Liberty University School of Divinity

Thesis Project Approval Sheet

____________________________________
Dr. Robert A. Gowins, Associate Professor
Liberty University School of Divinity

____________________________________
Dr. Rodney Dempsey, Professor
Liberty University School of Divinity
ABSTRACT

CULTURAL BASED DISCIPLING ACCORDING TO THE STRATEGIES OF JESUS

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Jonathan Eric Smith

Liberty University School of Divinity, 2018

Mentor: Dr. Robert A. Gowins

Many newly planted and existing churches in America have difficulty developing a discipleship culture. They focus on weekly worship gatherings and Bible Study classes. Gathering for worship and Bible Study is needed and right, but when this is the only activity, discipleship and a holistic healthy church culture is not occurring. Unfortunately, many churches engage in a consumer-driven culture with people unwilling to be in a sacrificial discipleship process for the Gospel’s sake.

Jesus had four primary strategies for developing disciples. They are the gathered strategy, the small group strategy, the mentoring strategy and the sending strategy. Each is part of a holistic and balanced approach to discipleship in a non-Christian culture. For example, Jesus gathered larger groups for teaching. The small group strategy found Jesus spending time with the disciples and others for a purposeful and for God’s Kingdom. Mentoring happened when Jesus engaged in life on life discipleship moments with a smaller group of disciples. Jesus and the early church sent out his disciples to engage in Kingdom work.

Each strategy develops holistic disciples. Churches that seek to fulfill their mission should be compelled to take an honest look at their discipleship culture and adjust strategies accordingly. This project will demonstrate that numerical growth and church health occur more often with those churches that implement Jesus’ four strategies. Those that are not implementing them are stagnant. With the numerical decline and closure of churches, stagnation is not desirable and implementing discipleship strategies is part of the answer for twenty-first century churches.

Abstract length: 253 words.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Krystal, my amazing wife who has supported me through this journey and has been my support in Kingdom work for over 12 years and our son Weathers.

Thanks to all my friends and family in the faith who have discipled me and encouraged me to continue to seek Jesus and the advancement of His Kingdom.
# Table of Contents

Copyright Page ............................................................................................... ii  
Signature Page .............................................................................................. iii  
Abstract ........................................................................................................ iv  
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents .......................................................................................... vi  
Figures ............................................................................................................ ix  
Abbreviations ............................................................................................... xi  

**Chapter One: Introduction** ........................................................................ 1  
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................... 5  
  Statement of Limitations .......................................................................... 6  
  Terminology Defined ............................................................................... 8  
  Theoretical Basis ....................................................................................... 9  
  Statement of Methodology ....................................................................... 10  
  Literature Review .................................................................................... 12  
  Biblical Content ...................................................................................... 13  
  The Gathered Strategy ............................................................................. 13  
  Small Group Strategy .............................................................................. 14  
  Mentoring Strategy ................................................................................ 16  
  Sending Strategy ...................................................................................... 17  
  Discipleship-Focused Resources ............................................................... 18  
  Summary .................................................................................................. 24
## Chapter Two: Methodological Considerations .................................................................25

How the Research was Conducted .................................................................................26

The Theological Basis for Practicing Jesus’ Four Discipling Strategies .........................27

*Jesus Modeled the Gathering Strategy* ..............................................................................28
  *The Early Church Gathered to Worship* .................................................................30
  *The Early Church Practiced Gathering* .................................................................31

*Jesus Modeled the Small Group Strategy* .................................................................32
  *The Early Church Practiced Small Groups* ............................................................33
  *What Does It Mean to Be Missional?* .......................................................................33

*Jesus Practiced the Mentoring Strategy* .................................................................34
  *The Early Church Practiced the Mentoring Strategy* ...............................................35

*Jesus Practiced the Sending Strategy* ..........................................................................36
  *The Early Church Practiced the Sending Strategy* ....................................................37

Practical Application of the Four Strategies Jesus Used for Discipleship ......................37

Summary ...........................................................................................................................39

## Chapter Three: Discipleship in American Churches ....................................................40

The Four Discipling Strategies Used by Jesus ..............................................................41

*The Gathering Strategy* .............................................................................................42
*The Small Group Strategy* ..........................................................................................42
*The Mentoring Strategy* .............................................................................................43
*The Sending Strategy* .................................................................................................44

Churches Surveyed That Are Applying All Four Strategies .........................................45

Unreached America ........................................................................................................47

The Church Disconnect .................................................................................................48

Disengagement and The Next Generation ......................................................................50

Summary ...........................................................................................................................55

## Chapter Four: Discipleship Survey Responses from Churches ....................................56

Analysis of the Disciple Making Process .......................................................................56
Chapter Five: The Four Strategies Going Forward ................................................. 68

Application of the Four Strategies Further Explained ....................................... 71

The Gathering Strategy and the Reveal Study .................................................. 72
The Small Group Strategy and the Reveal Study .............................................. 73
The Mentoring Strategy ................................................................................. 74
The Sending Strategy ..................................................................................... 74

The Purpose Driven Model and The Four Strategies ....................................... 75
The Up-In-Out Triangle and The Four Strategies ........................................... 76
The Bold Moves Four-Step Process and The Four Strategies ......................... 78

Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 79

Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 84

Appendix A: Church Leadership Survey ......................................................... 88

Appendix B: Vaughn Forest Church: A Case Study ......................................... 91

IRB Approval ................................................................................................... 95
FIGURES

Figure 1: The Four Strategies for Discipleship ................................................................. 28
Figure 2: Worship Style Survey Results ............................................................................ 42
Figure 3: New Member Class Offering ............................................................................... 42
Figure 4: Mentoring Groups and Discipleship Satisfaction ................................................. 43
Figure 5: Church Community Outreach ............................................................................. 44
Figure 6: Churches Practicing All Four Strategies .............................................................. 45
Figure 7: Q15 – How would you describe your worship/music style? ................................. 57
Figure 8: Q11 – What percentage has your church-wide attendance grown in the past two years? ........................................................................................................... 58
Figure 9: Q 6 – Does your church have a membership class/next steps process for new people? 59
Figure 10: Q 7 – What percentage of your Sunday attendance is in small groups? .............. 60
Figure 11: Q 16 – What is the most important for disciple-making in your church? .......... 61
Figure 12: Q – 8 Are you satisfied with your current discipleship process? ......................... 61
Figure 13: Q5 – Does your church have groups of 2-5 adults that are gender specific to intentionally develop disciples in your disciple-making process? ................................................. 63
Figure 14: Q 14 – How many community-wide outreach events does your church do annually? 64
Figure 15: Q 4 – What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in global mission trips? ........................................................................................................... 64
Figure 16: Q 2 – What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in local mission work? ......................................................................................................... 65
Figure 17: The Up-In-Out Triangle and the Discipling Culture ......................................... 77
Figure 18: Five Steps for Building a Healthy Church ......................................................... 80
Figure 19: Potential Measures of Church Health Related to the Four Strategies of Jesus ..........82
Figure 20: Vaughn Forest Church Weekly Attendance Growth Chart (Gathering Strategy) ..........93
Figure 21: Vaughn Forest Church’s Life Group Involvement (Small Group Strategy) ...............93
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChrTo</td>
<td>Christianity Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed.</td>
<td>Edition/Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>et al</td>
<td>And others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ff.</td>
<td>and following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>https</td>
<td>Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibid</td>
<td>(Latin: <em>Ibidem</em>) In the same place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TX</td>
<td>Texas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One

Introduction

“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”

– Albert Einstein

This project is a response to the shared experience of many pastors in North America, specifically those in the southeastern United States, that have a burning desire and a broken heart to see their church revitalized and a renewed vision for discipleship that transforms their church’s culture. This concern cannot be ignored because the American church is experiencing decline.¹ This writer currently serves as the Lead Pastor of a church of twenty-five hundred people. In its history, it has supported and planted multiple churches. Also, it has partnered with other churches wanting to plant churches. This author has a great burden for America to have a renewed focus on the teachings and practices of Jesus in making disciples. The four strategies for making disciples discussed in this project are crucial to the holistic discipling process this author has followed in his revitalization efforts. This author will show that this strategy is crucial to Jesus’ multiplication strategy for His church.² Even so, researcher George Barna notes that “only 20 percent of Christian adults are involved in some sort of discipleship activity.”³


² See Chapter Four for results and Appendix B regarding Vaughn Forest Church’s performance.

also shares that the methods and the terminology used to describe discipleship are varied, inconsistent, and open to interpretation.

Discipleship evokes different responses. Is it about a Bible study, a worship service, or a small group that gets together to learn as much about Jesus and the Bible as possible? The twenty first century church equates discipleship with how much information someone can obtain and negates the value and importance of imitation and life journey. When looking at the life and teachings of Jesus, it is evident that Jesus calls the church to not only teach what was learned from Him, but also to practice the type of lifestyle He practiced. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20)\(^4\) not only commands His disciples to go and live lives that witness to and spread the Gospel, but also to teach others to follow the teachings and life of Jesus. Discipleship at its core is to imitate the life of Jesus. He is the one whom Christians follow and are called upon to imitate in this life.\(^5\)

The ministry of Jesus includes what he reveals to His followers in regards to how they are to grow as disciples and to reproduce as disciples by raising up others as disciples of Christ. Many people miss the intentionality that Jesus practiced and how He prepared His disciples before His ascension to the right hand of the Father. There are four major strategies that Jesus uses, and have become points that every generation and culture wrestles with, to discover the most effective method for application to their own context. They are the Gathered Strategy, the Small Group Strategy, the Mentoring Strategy and the Sending Strategy. The Gathered Strategy is utilized as Jesus gathers larger groups of people for teaching and worship. The Small Group

\(^4\) All scripture references are taken from the New International Version, 1984 edition.

\(^5\) Matthew 16:24.
Strategy occurs when and where people are intentionally involved in a specific group for a particular purpose for the Kingdom of God. The Mentoring Strategy happens when Jesus practices life-on-life mentoring with His disciples as either the entire group of twelve (or more) or as a subgroup of the disciples. The Sending Strategy focuses on how Jesus sent His disciples to serve others and share His gospel.

The intended outcome for this project is to help twenty first century churches discern how their leaders can implement some of these same practices, in the fast paced and always quickly changing American culture. Even with the fast pace and never-ending changes, the principles, message and teachings of Jesus are never changing; however, the methods church leaders use to implement the principles of God often change. The challenges faced by church leaders and churches in this era are similar to those engaging the current generation that is consumed with entertainment, distractions, and varied definitions of success and its attainment. For leaders, this creates the challenge of cultivating an intentional and strategic discipling culture.

Perhaps many pastors and church leaders find themselves asking, “Is the church he leads following the model of Jesus to make disciples?” Barna’s research, 73% of church goers believe that their church is placing “a lot” of emphasis on spiritual growth and are satisfied. Yet, only 8% of pastors surveyed said that they are doing “very well” discipling new believers and are dissatisfied. Barna’s data presents a muddled picture for church leaders. This disconnect and varied perception reveals that the pastor and the person in the pew are not in agreement about the

---

6 The subgroup typically includes Peter, James, and John.

need for improvement. The discipling strategies of Jesus are holistic, developing a person’s mind, touching the heart and equipping hands for ministry. Each of these are essential for a person to be fully equipped and ready to live the sent life God has called believers to follow.⁸

Mike Breen has developed a model of discipleship that describes in an understandable way how Jesus lived His life: up, in and out. Breen describes “up” as Jesus living up in intimacy with the Heavenly Father. The “in” is Jesus living in community with His disciples. The “out” is Jesus living out the mission that God the Father sent Him to accomplish. Breen challenges the church to evaluate itself and to ask if the teaching and equipping of disciples follows the paradigm of up, in, and out.⁹

Operating in these three dimensions may not come naturally to a church or a disciple, but Breen argues that this is how God intended people to function. If it does not come naturally, then it must be done intentionally. Christians are to become committed to, and make an effort to, have up, in, and out in balance. When one dimension is missing or is suppressed, the other two do not work as they should. Up, in, and out is a three-dimensional matrix that balances the relationships that make up one’s life and the life of the community. Jesus modeled this balance for His disciples in His ministry. For Breen, the intent of a Christian should be to live all three dimensions in his or her life. When this is done, he or she will experience fruitfulness.¹⁰

The reason for describing these three dimensions of up, in, and out that Breen proposes, is to see the connectivity between the discipleship strategies of Jesus. The four strategies

---


¹⁰ Ibid, 76.
presuppose and incorporate the three directions. With the Gathered Strategy, Jesus gathers people in a larger setting to teach and worship God before they are sent out. The Small Group Strategy shows people when they live involved with a community on mission for the Kingdom. The Mentoring Strategy, occurred as Jesus practiced life-on-life mentoring with His disciples. In the Sending Strategy, Jesus sends out His disciples in teams for service and to share the gospel. When church bodies use such a model for discipleship, believers may receive a holistic and all-encompassing discipling experience that prepares them for the life and purpose God has given.

Barna’s research shows that “less than one percent of church leaders said they use a survey or other evaluation tool to determine the effectiveness of their spiritual discipleship programs.”11 An evaluation process helps a church to explore how Jesus made disciples and created a framework for evaluating a program’s efficacy. Often when what needs to be done is not clearly stated or understood, it is challenging for church leaders and church members.

**Statement of the Problem**

Currently, the American church is declining in terms of church member involvement or engagement, and a lack of new growth. Olson demonstrates that this decline is due to a discipleship problem and attempts to address a solution. The author seeks to address the absence of an intentional and holistic discipleship strategy that is connected to the decline of the church in America. Without a method, such as the discipling strategies of Jesus, the church flounders.12

---


12 David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 36.
The strategies Jesus used for disciple-making will be reviewed and analyzed for application to the context of the twenty-first century church. Included in the discussion, will be principles of application in clear steps that any church may take to create a discipling culture in a church community. Implementation methods may vary from church to church, but the content of the strategies may be adapted by any church community. It is the responsibility of church leadership in each church community to determine their fit into the culture and context in which they minister. That there is a problem with discipleship in the culture of the church is evident as noted in Barna’s research. This problem needs to be addressed by reviewing the strategies of Jesus. The hope is for a clear understanding of the problem, knowledge of Jesus’ methodology for discipleship, and then how it may be translated for usage by the twenty-first century church.

Statement of Limitations

Every generation of Christian church leaders faces challenges in the churches they serve. This project will focus on this generation’s challenge with discipleship. The impact of lackluster discipleship outcomes and the multitude of approaches is that church growth and church engagement are not meeting the need. With the multitude of church environments, cultures, etc., there will automatically be limitations due to discipleship’s very nature and expressions.

The project will be limited by its sole focus on North American Evangelical churches in the twenty-first century. Due to time, distance, language and cultural differentiations, the surveyed churches are English-speaking, American Evangelical churches. There is a common

culture shared between these churches of language, customs, socioeconomic, political, etc. Research into other people groups and how churches in those cultures incorporate the four discipling strategies of Jesus, based on languages, cultural experiences, cultural expectations and political environments (etc.) would be helpful, but is beyond this scope of this project based on time, expense and distance.

This project is limited in focus on traditional churches with a specific location. It is not focused on the house church movement which is dispersed into homes. It is its own unique expression. While there is a similarity in both the movement and this project on small groups of Christians meeting for various purposes in homes, this project will focus on small groups that are an expression of a larger traditional church. There is a difference in organizational culture.

This project is concerned about the context of discipleship. The strategic setting and the dynamics of that setting are explained. With this being so, teaching content is not the intended focus. The result is Jesus’ four strategies are applicable across denominational boundaries.

Finally, the highlighted breakdown between pastor and pew is a symptom of poor processes and culture. Generally, pastors see discipleship outcomes as poor with the average church member feeling that churches are doing pretty good. This project is not designed to fix this disconnect. Yet understanding it helps to clarify discipleship in the North American context. Even so, there are other differences. In *The State of Discipleship*, it is noted that there are different definitions and methods in use without consensus of language, methods or measures.

---


Terminology Defined

This project uses multiple terms that need clarification for understanding and clarity. The following will give working definitions for Gathered Strategy, Small Group Strategy, Mentoring Strategy, Sending Strategy, discipleship and engagement.

The four discipleship strategies of Jesus will be defined. Events recorded in Scripture when Jesus would gather large groups of people for teaching and worship give rise to the Gathered Strategy. Evidence of a purposeful Small Group Strategy occurs when people intentionally come together to encourage each other, to study the Bible, and to live out the Great Commission in a small group setting.\(^\text{17}\) For the North American context, small groups are healthiest when they are intentionally relational, Gospel-centered and engaged in local and global missions. The Mentoring Strategy is a purposeful choice Jesus employs for life-on-life mentoring with the disciples as a whole group or a selected smaller group. This smaller group is composed of Peter, James and John. Finally, Jesus uses a Sending Strategy when the disciples are sent out to serve others or to spread the Good News in small teams.

Discipleship is practicing these four strategies. It is a lifelong process and journey that is deeply rooted in a relationship with Jesus.\(^\text{18}\) This lifelong journey lives out the four strategies that Jesus taught and modeled with the disciples and then repeated in the Early Church.

Engagement is the extent to which one is committed and involved. Acts 1:8 and 2:42 give an example of the committed involvement of Early Church members.


Theoretical Basis

The basis of this project is the content of the teachings and practices of Jesus as His disciples make disciples who make disciples. The theoretical basis for this project includes the biblical, theological and theoretical foundations of discipleship. The call of discipleship comes from Jesus in Matthew 4:19 when Jesus calls out some of the disciples and invites them to follow Him and to become fishers of men. Jesus not only calls and invites disciples to follow Him, but He also calls them to love others in His name. This mindset will produce fruit in their lives as described in John 15:8-9. The biblical renderings of Jesus’ call to follow Him include both the call and the challenge to live for Him and produce fruit as His disciple.

Reading through the New Testament, it is impossible to escape Jesus’ imperative to focus on the importance of making disciples. The church is called and created to make disciples that represent Jesus to the world as His ambassadors. Jesus’ earthly ministry was dedicated to developing the twelve disciples. Scripture demonstrates that Jesus was committed to developing them into the leaders that He needed to accomplish the task of the Great Commission. He was so dedicated to this imperative that He would often leave crowds behind to be with the twelve.

A powerful theological framework for discipleship is given throughout the Gospels. What is taught by Jesus is practically demonstrated by Jesus’ followers in the book of Acts. The entire book of Acts is the story of how Jesus’ followers live for Him. The practice of disciple-making the way that Jesus practiced with the twelve disciples was carried over into the Early

---

20 2 Corinthians 5:20.
21 Acts 2:42.
22 Mark 9:30-31.
Church by the disciples. Acts 2:42-47 demonstrates how the followers were committed to living out the spiritual disciplines with a quality of fellowship (koinonia) as noted. These verses show the church in fellowship and living life together.

They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The Early Church was devoted to the Word of God, prayer and worship. It was a radical, costly commitment. These believers would sell what they owned to provide for anyone with need.

Currently, the American church’s numerical growth is not keeping up with the numerical growth of the population.23 A study of the life and ministry of Jesus and that of the Early Church demonstrates a commitment to making disciples resulting in exponential growth that was birthed from a movement of God. Disciple-making is the plan Jesus gave to His followers in Matthew 28:19-20 for expansion and growth. Christians are to share Jesus’ message in public and private (Matthew 28) along with a dedication to the spiritual growth of others and themselves.24

Statement of Methodology

The following describes the project’s design. The project will have five chapters. The survey used in this project consists of twenty-one questions given to three hundred lead pastors of local churches in the United States. The survey was designed to elicit the common methods

23 Olson, The American Church in Crisis, 78-79.

24 Ibid, 210-213.
and processes being practiced in the local churches in the United States for disciple-making. The twenty-one questions are designed to discover what churches are doing as it relates Jesus’ discipling strategies. The research and results will be presented as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter one is the introduction to this project and will serve as an overview to the topic of discipleship and to the project as a whole. The introduction will describe the problems, the limitations, the theoretical basis followed in the project, the methods employed and a literary review. It is an overview of the project and guides the project’s development as it considers discipleship in North American churches in the twenty first century.

Chapter 2: Methodological Considerations

Chapter two examines different scriptures that give direction on disciple-making. While the chosen scriptures may not cover all that the Bible teaches on discipleship, a broad overview is given of how discipleship was practiced in the life of Jesus and the Early Church. A basis for biblical discipleship will be given in this chapter and it will give guidance for understanding the four strategies of Jesus.

Chapter 3: Discipleship in American Churches

Chapter three looks in depth at the state of disciple-making in the American church. It is critical to understand the current state of the church so that future progress may be made. The goal is an effective approach or strategy for disciple-making in an ever-changing world. This
Chapter will incorporate research data from leading authors on discipleship in America. It will describe how pastors regard discipleship in the American church.

**Chapter 4: Discipleship Survey Responses from Churches**

Chapter four’s purpose is to look at churches in twenty-first century North America to determine if they are making progress in disciple-making. This chapter will seek to discover if these churches utilize the basic principles of disciple-making that are seen in the New Testament as practiced by Jesus and the Early Church. Survey results for this project will be explained. It will also show that practicing Jesus’ strategies results in growth.

**Chapter 5: The Four Strategies Going Forward**

The fifth and final chapter will outline some practical principles gathered from the teachings of Jesus and the Early Church that can be applied to current North American churches. This chapter will summarize the study and make suggestions on what could be done to improve the church’s role in the disciple-making journey.

**Literature Review**

Much has been written on discipleship. This may be due to Jesus’ command and His commission to make other disciples. These commands are essential for Christian practice. The church needs to make disciples for the long term and because of Jesus’ command to make disciples. If a church is too busy to make disciples, it has lost touch with its mission of Gospel proclamation for salvation. A church’s culture helps it to adhere to its biblical mission and purpose. For those that do not adhere to Jesus’ mission a church has attendees, but few disciples that make other disciples. This dynamic indicates a need for revitalization. This author’s

---

25 Matthew 8:18-20.
journey of discipleship and his understanding of discipleship processes have been shaped by the influence of many authors and mentors as evidenced in this project.

**Biblical Content**

The biblical “heart” of this project is Jesus’ Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Lessons from the life and ministry of Jesus teach how to live and go about fulfilling His commission. In the following, passages from the Bible will be presented that demonstrate the strategies Jesus used to make disciples and how His followers applied those principles. They will be presented with the four strategies described herein: the Gathered Strategy, the Small Group Strategy, the Mentoring Strategy and the Sending Strategy.

**The Gathered Strategy**

In the New Testament, there are many places where the church is gathered publicly with Jesus, Peter, Paul, and others, proclaiming the Gospel to believers and unbelievers. This became the historical practice of the church until it faced persecution and had to gather in private underground settings.

*John 18:9-20.* These two verses show Jesus speaking with the High Priest and shares that He has been speaking publicly about the kingdom of God and the reason He came to earth. These two verses underscore how Jesus talked about His teaching publicly and that He gathered crowds to hear Him teach.

*Acts 2:42-47.* These verses describe the early practices of the church and a way of life that Jesus trained them in for ongoing practice prior to His ascension. In verse 46, it is told that
all believers met daily in the temple courts, which was a public place. Here, they worshiped, preached and prayed. These activities as they were engaged in a public forum contributed to significant numerical increase and spiritual development as God gave favor.

Hebrews 10:24-25. The author of Hebrews reminds the church not to neglect the gathering of the church body. The church is counseled to spur one another onward and to be encouraged. Encouragement and perseverance, major themes in Hebrews, are difficult to proclaim when the gathering of the church is neglected.

Acts 4:1-4. These verses demonstrate how Peter and John continued to gather people publicly and to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. It shows how there were people who were not believers coming to these gatherings and became believers upon hearing about Jesus.

1 Timothy 4:13. As Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, he was admonished to devote himself to the public reading, preaching and teaching of Scripture and, specifically, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul taught young church leaders in his writings, he admonished church leaders that the proclamation of the Good News should be practiced.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34. These verses show Paul addressing an issue concerning the Lord’s Supper in the Corinthian church and giving instructions on how it should be handled. For this study, the emphasis is that the Corinthian church gathered together as a body.

Colossians 3:16. Paul wrote to the church in Colossae regarding their worship of Jesus. He encouraged them to gather for teaching and counsel. He further encouraged public singing through the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as corporate worship.

Small Group Strategy

As the Gospel spread and developed into the Early Church, it met in either large or small groups for various purposes as seen in Acts 2:42-47. The main purpose was to create a culture
where believers were on mission with God and for God. Jesus was the architect of this type of community and His disciples were called to continue meeting together. It is important to note that Jesus lived His life in relationship with His disciples throughout the Gospels in both settings.

1 John 4:7-21. These verses describe the kind of love, community and relationships Christians are called upon to have as a church community. The believers were to be united as a believing community dedicated to Jesus and to each other with intense love.

John 20:19-23. Jesus’ disciples were huddled together on a Sunday evening after His death on the cross. In a post-resurrection appearance, He was suddenly standing among them. During this gathering, the disciples as a group were given a purpose. Jesus told His disciples that He was sending them out as His representatives to share the Good News with the world.

Matthew 10:1-4. These verses demonstrate that the disciples were chosen to be part of Jesus’ initial small group for a purpose. Jesus chose them to live life together, to learn from Him, to be His disciples and to engage in different activities in obedience. In this case, casting out demons and healing diseases and sicknesses.

Acts 2:42-47. This scripture has already been mentioned (see above). But it also demonstrates the gathered community’s commitment as Christ-followers to each other and the purposes of God. As a small group, they engaged in meeting each other’s needs, sacrificing wealth for each other, worshiping together, fellowshipping as a family and praying together.

Colossians 3:12-13. These two verses describe how church members are to interact with each other and forgive each other as the Lord forgives. These verses give direction on how the small groups of believers are to interact with each other during challenging times of disagreement or persecution.
Ephesians 4:9-32. These verses are like Colossians 3:12-13. Yet, they give insight into the problems of disobedience and grieving the Holy Spirit. It is their lack of forgiveness, not being united in purpose, and holding on to bitterness that spreads division.

**Mentoring Strategy**

Jesus was intentional in His investment into the lives of His twelve disciples and even more into the lives of three individuals out of the twelve. This inner circle, the men that Jesus chose to invest more into are Peter, James and John. In this way, Jesus reveals His strategy for leadership development. Jesus saw the value of giving His followers the example of inviting these three men into His life even closer than the other nine. Scripture records unique moments that Jesus allows them to experience with Him that the others did not. Jesus was equipping them to lead in the church’s early development after His ascension.

Matthew 17:1-13. These verses reveal the special investment Jesus made into the lives of Peter, James and John. These three men discipled by Jesus at a deeper level and Jesus revealed things to them that the other disciples did not experience first-hand.

Mark 14:32-42. This portion of Mark is about when Jesus is to be arrested in Gethsemane. He took Peter, James and John with Him and asked them to keep watch while He battled with what was to come in the events leading to and with His death on the cross.

Mark 5:21-43. When Jesus healed the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader, He allowed only Peter, James and John to go into the room with Him where the girl would be healed. These men were witnesses to this miracle.

James 5:13-19. The book of James teaches that it is through confession and prayer in faith with others, especially with those in authority, that people experience renewal and spiritual
healing. These verses emphasize the role of an elder in compassionate care during illness, as a confessor for sin and as a person who seeks out those who wander from the truth. This type of accountability speaks to the mentor and mentee relationship. In such life-on-life relationships, God grows His disciples.

**Sending Strategy**

The people of God have always been called to be on mission with Him and for Him. Jesus practiced this with His disciples and prepared them for their mission during His earthly ministry. The mission has been to lead others toward redemption and to become worshippers of God. This same mission is applicable to Christians in the North American context. It is to see people redeemed from sin and worshipping God; giving God the true worship He deserves.

**Acts 1:8.** Jesus gives His followers the command to live their lives as missionaries for Him. He charges Christians to represent Him everywhere in the world.

**John 20:21.** Jesus teaches his disciples that God the Father sent Him on a specific mission and now He is sending them on a mission to spread the Gospel.

**Mark 16:15.** This verse commands Christ’s followers to go into all the world and proclaim the message of Jesus. The church is sent out on a mission and they are filled with the Holy Spirit to accomplish great things for the Lord.

**Luke 24:46-48.** Jesus teaches His disciples in these verses that He will die on the cross and be resurrected from the dead. His command to them is to go and preach this message as His disciples. They are to proclaim the message of forgiveness of sins. Also, these disciples are to be His witnesses of what has occurred in a life lived with Jesus.
2 Corinthians 5:11-21. In 2 Corinthians, Paul taught that Christians are called to be ambassadors of Jesus. They are His representatives to the world and it is through them that others will hear and believe in Him. It is through Jesus that Christians are made new creations and have a purpose. This purpose is to help others discover the reconciliation that is available between God and man through Christ Jesus.

Luke 10:1-16. This portion of Luke’s Gospel gives the reader insight into Jesus’ community of believers and how it extended beyond just the twelve disciples. This text tells how Jesus appointed seventy-two (a larger number than the group of twelve) disciples and then sent them out in His name to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ community was bigger than just the twelve men along with the women who accompanied them. It was a larger group striving to live on mission with Him. Similar is Acts 1:15 where one hundred and twenty disciples made up the church and even more at Pentecost.

Discipleship-Focused Resources

Those that have written on discipleship provide practical application in the current setting. In the following, contemporary research will be highlighted regarding the four strategies of Jesus as it pertains to this project. For example, Building a Discipling Culture by Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, focuses on teaching and understanding how Jesus lived, while discussing how Jesus calls those in the present day to live. The authors clearly describe how to create a culture within a church community that focuses on disciple-making. Their focus on how Jesus lived directionally (up, in and out) is insightful for understanding the life of Jesus and how Christians are called to imitate Him.²⁶

²⁶ Breen and Cockram, Building a Discipling Culture, 57-58.
Another book by Mike Breen and co-author Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, is helpful for understanding what Biblical community should and can look like in the twenty-first century. These authors clearly provide a biblical case for why missional communities should be present in the church community with guidelines for practice. It is a practical book on how to implement a sense of mission or purpose in groups. One eye-opening statement for many twenty-first century Christians comes from this book:

> In the Old Testament, there was a tremendously strong belief in covenant community. This began with Israel’s relations with God and then extended to each person in the community. The understanding of God’s calling was rarely individual and primarily seen as for the whole people group.²⁷

*Four Fields of Kingdom Growth* by Nathan and Kari Shrank helps the reader understand some of the discipling principles Jesus used that are found in the New Testament. It is extremely helpful for teaching others how to share the Gospel of Jesus.²⁸

In the book, *Innovate Church*, Rod Dempsey writes a chapter entitled: “What is God’s Will for My Life? Disciple!” This chapter lays out ten key indicators of someone who is a disciple of Christ. This chapter was very insightful showing a simple and clear list of indicators for identifying a follower of Jesus.²⁹

George Barna’s *Growing True Disciples* is helpful. Barna and his team give insight into what is currently happening in the church in America. He also calls for significant change to be

---


made. His seventh chapter on the five different models of effective discipleship is extremely helpful, especially his information on the missional church.  

One book that digs deep into the importance of life-on-life, mentoring discipleship, is *Cultivating a Life for God* by Neil Cole. This book is about the value of life-on-life relationships for discipling and how to go about it. The Life Transformation groups that Cole describes explores the possibilities that exist if Christians are obedient to the call of Christ.  

Mark Dever’s book *What is a Healthy Church?* is a short read on church health. In chapter twelve, he deals with church discipleship and growth, specifically giving indicators of that growth taking place in the life of the church. These are simple, yet crucial, insights into a church and its discipling health. Dever charges the reader to make sure that church leaders are honestly moving people from infancy to maturity.

When leaders choose disciples, they are often faced with the choice of “who” is to be equipped? Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey in *The Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group* use the acronym FAITH to aid in the choosing. Earley and Dempsey describe the qualities to look for in people to be discipled: Faith, Available, Integrity, Teachable, the Heart of God. These qualities are important for leaders to seek in another person. These qualities are important for creating a culture that reproduces leaders.


32 Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

Additionally, Earley wrote *8 Habits of Effective Small Group Leaders*. Earley advises that for those leading missional communities, teams or any group, that others are watching them and the way a leader leads will inspire a watcher to go one way or another. The leadership habits that Earley shares are simple, but essential habits every leader needs for doing ministry.\(^{34}\)

*The Disciple-Making Church* by Bill Hull describes the big picture of discipleship. Hull sees discipleship as the calling for every Christ follower in an age when many see discipleship as only for the serious Christians. Hull defines who is a disciple, who makes disciples, what the process should look like and how long it should last. This book has much information about the discipling process and how discipleship may be done in a church setting.\(^{35}\)

*Creating Community* by Andy Stanley and Bill Willits is practical and useful as it explains the importance of community and how to develop it. This book deals with simple steps of strategy and implementation for creating community in the church. This book points out why some groups are better suited for the home setting and others for the church property. It brings clarity to the needed qualities of group leaders and how to be consistent and reproducible.\(^{36}\)

A consistent staple is Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose Driven Church*. Warren writes an overall perspective on how to lead, to structure, and to do church. The section that is helpful for church strategy is called “Reaching Out to Your Community.” This section helps the reader to define the people they are striving to reach and how they will go about doing it. This is

\(^{34}\) Dave Earley, *8 Habits of Effective Small Group Leaders* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2001).


\(^{36}\) Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2004).
relevant to all church leaders because no matter the style or type of ministry, it is critical to know the strategy to be used to hit the target. Warren also gives methods on how to hit the target.37

Twelve Ordinary Men by John MacArthur is a must read for all Christ-followers as it gives a glimpse into the lives of each of the disciples. MacArthur goes into detail about how each man was chosen and the content of the callings of Jesus on the lives of the twelve disciples. He says the first is a call to conversion, the second is a call to ministry, the third is the call to apostleship, and the last is a call to martyrdom. This gives insight into the process of someone becoming a fully devoted disciple of Christ. This book is valuable for understanding the disciples and discipleship.38

Greg Ogden in Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ offers a guide to journey with someone through the process of mentoring discipleship. He walks the reader through a simple process of how to invest in each other’s lives around God’s Word. The book describes the role of the disciple and the disciple maker. It is one of the better resources available to use for discipling someone through the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. The book is organized very clearly and simply with twenty-four sections that walk through some of the main teachings of Jesus that were used with the twelve disciples that he called to follow Him.39


The book, *4 Chair Discipling*, by Dann Spader is an engaging book about how to grow a movement of disciple-makers. He teaches that Jesus used four different chairs in the disciple-making process. The first chair is Jesus’ invitation to “Come and See” as in John 1:39. The second chair is Jesus’ invitation to “Follow Me” in John 1:43. Spader notes that Jesus’ third chair is to “Become a Fisher of People” (Matthew 4:19). The fourth chair Jesus uses for disciple-making is to “Go and Bear Fruit.” (John 15:16). Jesus recognizes that disciples are at different stages. Yet, He works with each disciple to take them on to the next level.40

*The State of Discipleship*, produced by the Barna Group and commissioned by the Navigators, looks at the state of discipleship in the North American church. This project was a joint effort to research what is happening in discipleship. The project uncovers many interesting points about discipleship and the church. Yet, the two most revealing discoveries are the two greatest barriers to discipleship. The identified root issues are 1) the busyness of people and 2) a lack of commitment to discipleship. They also discovered that an isolationist approach to spiritual growth has become common among Christians. It is also noted that church leaders need a clear plan for discipleship and a method to evaluate spiritual health in churches.41

Also helpful is an article from the C.S. Lewis Institute, *The Decade of Discipleship: How a Discipleship Movement Will Restore the Church*. In this article, it is noted that the American church is in crisis, but there is also a renewed passion for discipleship. It gives a lot of statistical information, but several concerns stand out. First, only 3% of 16-29-year-olds in America have a positive view of evangelical Christians. Second, only half of those who identify as Christians


believe in absolute moral truth. What is happening appears to be a closing of the ideological gap between Christians and non-Christians, leaving the church compromised. It is argued that for change to happen, a church must view discipleship as its most important action and it must be firmly written into a church’s DNA.42

Each item demonstrates the state of discipleship in America along with various practices and strategies to increase church engagement. The biblical passages focus the church’s mission – make disciples of all nations as commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20.

Summary

The North American church is in the midst of an ongoing numerical decline. Discipleship, or the lack thereof, seems to be one of the contributing factors in this decline. Also, it appears that a perceptual disconnect between the pastor and the pew is occurring around discipleship. A majority of pastors report being dissatisfied with current discipleship methods and outcomes. But a majority of church attendees express satisfaction. This disconnect is due in to church culture, a lack of focus on discipleship, differing methodologies and perspectives and a lack of effective measures. Perhaps the church should reevaluate how it makes disciples and incorporate the manner and methodology that Jesus utilized to produce disciples. The four-fold strategy that Jesus employed can offer a solution to the disciple-making dilemma faced by the twenty first century North American church.

Chapter Two

Methodological Considerations

“Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything we have.”

– Billy Graham

This chapter will include practical methods and applications for applying the four strategies of discipleship used by Jesus: 1) the Gathered Strategy, 2) the Small Group Strategy, 3) the Mentoring Strategy and 4) the Sending Strategy. As a church planter, church planting leader and as the lead pastor of different churches, these strategies have formed the core of the ministry philosophy followed by this writer in each ministry context. Measurable and significant results have been achieved by applying Jesus’ strategies in each context. The content of the strategy is consistent, but the application is adaptable to the specific ministry context and timeframe. The following will give a theological and theoretical framework for applying the strategies in any ministry context. It is important though that church leaders determine how each strategy is applied and practiced in their own unique context. Jesus gives a blueprint for the church, but the application is not given so that the church may be relevant in all generations and in all contexts.

The twenty first century North American church is experiencing a difference of opinion between church-attending Christians and church leaders. Christian adults surveyed by the Barna Group\(^{43}\) believe that their church is 52% of the time doing an effective job of discipling and

---

\(^{43}\) The Barna Group, “The State of Discipleship,” 2.
agree with the statement “definitely does a good job helping people grow spiritually.” The differences arise when in the same surveys, only 1% of church leaders believe that “churches today are doing very well at discipling new and young believers.” This is a unique challenge as many congregants see things working well enough and church leaders believe that discipleship is not working.

The research instrument used for this project indicates that 77% of church leaders are not satisfied with their churches’ current discipleship effectiveness. That there is a disconnect between the pastor and the pew regarding discipleship is obvious. The result is that there is a greater difficulty in demonstrating the problem and then describing what changes are to be made. As one group sees things going well in discipleship, the other sees poor results. There is a need for greater alignment between congregants and church leaders.

**How the Research was Conducted**

Research for this project was conducted using a twenty-question survey that was sent to a sample of over three hundred churches. Fourteen surveys were completed and returned. The content of the survey was to investigate how churches and pastors engage the four discipleship strategies of Jesus: 1) the Gathered Strategy, 2) the Small Group Strategy, 3) the Mentoring Strategy and 4) the Sending Strategy. Participating churches ranged in size from 50 people in the congregation to over four thousand. The congregations were mixed in terms of contemporary or traditional worship styles and music. The churches were given a chance to answer questions that indicate Jesus’ four strategies of discipleship. The resulting data gave insight into how a randomized group of churches worked and how many were balanced in their discipleship approach. For this study, “balanced” would be implementing and holding all four of
the strategies in a creative tension of give and take rather than diminishing or neglecting any of the four strategies. Each strategy is equally important.

**The Theological Basis for Practicing Jesus’ Four Discipling Strategies**

Jesus gave the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 to His followers in the post-crucifixion, post-resurrection and pre-ascension context. He was about to ascend to the right hand of God the Father and He gave them a purpose – the charge to go and make disciples. Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey write, “being a disciple and making disciples is the purpose for your life.”  

In their book, *Disciple-making Is…*, they teach that the Great Commission is fulfilled and disciples are made when we go, preach the gospel, baptize new believers and train them. The Great Commission is both a calling and a pattern to follow. Any Christ follower is called to make disciples. This is seen in the life and ministry of Jesus as well as in the customs of the Early Church. The pattern that was actually practiced was to gather the church publicly, use small groups intentionally, and do life together at home and elsewhere through a desire to be like iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17) in each other’s lives.

In *Innovate Church*, edited by Jonathan Falwell, the Ten Facets of a Disciple are listed:

1. A disciple is someone who seriously considers the cost before following Christ.
2. A disciple is someone who is totally committed to Christ.
3. A disciple is someone who is willing to carry his or her individual burden to sacrifice for Christ and His cause.
4. A disciple is someone who is willing to give up all earthly possessions.
5. A disciple is someone who continues in God’s word and experiences freedom in Christ.
6. A disciple is one who genuinely loves other believers.
7. A disciple is one who abides in Christ, prays, bears fruit, and glorifies God.

---


8. A disciple is one who is full of the Holy Spirit
9. A disciple is a servant who obediently follows the desires of the Master.
10. A disciple is one who is intimately involved in the mission of Jesus to make disciples.46

Each item listed above from Innovate Church reflects ten desired qualities of a disciple that church leaders and pastors could include in a biblically-based discipleship process. In all, Christian leaders should be intentional and strategic in how a congregation is to be discipled. Figure 1 demonstrates that holistic and balanced discipleship occurs when all four strategies are present and held in balance.

![Figure 1: The Four Strategies of Discipleship](image)

**Jesus Modeled the Gathering Strategy**

In His public ministry, Jesus gathered crowds of people and taught about the Kingdom of God. This is not a secret to anyone who has read the Gospels. This same proclamation is typical

---

of churches when gathered for worship and teaching. The Greek word referring to “crowd” is used one hundred and seventy-five times in the Gospels and the book of Acts. Jesus spent time with crowds. But the point is not to say how many times Jesus was in a crowd, but to demonstrate that much of His ministry was spent proclaiming and living out the truths of the Gospel to crowds of people. A similar picture is given in Acts of the disciples. In light of the debate in ministry circles regarding church as attractional or missional, the clearer picture seems to be a balance of both. Jesus did things that attracted crowds and he also challenged crowds to take the next steps to live missionally. Jesus used these moments to teach God’s truths by preaching, healing or engaging in meeting human need.

Crowds were moved with awe and engaged in moments of worship in response to Jesus’ words and actions at different moments in His ministry. When Jesus heals the paralytic man in Matthew 9:1-8, the crowd responded with awe and praise. Verse 8 states, “When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man.” In this story, what occurs appears to be a spiritual assessment of the men who brought the man to Jesus as He perceives their faith. Jesus also assessed and met the spiritual need for forgiveness of the man to be healed and spoke against the naysayers in the crowd. Then He taught a short lesson in response about the nature of forgiveness and His authority. Then He healed the paralyzed man. After the man was healed, the crowd responded with awe and praise.

In Luke 10:1-23, Jesus sends out a larger group of disciples. Instead of the twelve disciples, he sends out seventy-two for a purpose. He gives them clear directions on what to do and how to live. While the purpose of these verses is not about worship gatherings, Jesus did draw upon a larger group from which seventy-two followers were sent. They were given a purpose and they were sent out to preach and teach about the Kingdom of God.
Large group gatherings in the Gospels are often the venue Jesus used for proclaiming the nearness and truths of the Kingdom of God. He also proclaimed the need for repentance and belief as found in Mark 1:14-15. Verse 15 states: “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News!” Massive crowds were common in Jesus’ ministry due to His healing and teaching. His sermons were challenges to the listener and an invitation to follow Him. The larger public and corporate gatherings were continued as the church is generally portrayed in Acts, except during times of persecution. At such times, the church would meet as smaller groups and in houses.

**The Early Church Gathered to Worship**

In Hebrews 10:24-25, the writer challenges the church not to forsake the gathering together of the body. They were to gather for encouragement to become more loving and to exhibit good deeds. The admonition was to gather faithfully, even though others had stopped gathering. In a similar vein, Matthew 18:20 assures the believer of His presence when believers gathered even in the smallest of groups for various purposes. One such purpose would have been how the church dealt with sin and judgement. This verse is a hinge between verses 15-17 and verses 21-35. Verses 15-17 focus on progressive discipline in the church. The parable of the unmerciful servant (vv. 21-35) describes judgment for the one who received mercy, but did not give it. Both show a need for Jesus’ presence when the body deals with sin and judgement.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossian church, he gives a challenge to encourage each other by singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to the Lord. This is obviously a practice done together as these actions are to be taken in “the body of Christ”. In 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul gives instruction on how the church is to keep order and behave during worship gatherings. It is clear then that worship gatherings of the church in the New Testament included the singing of
hymns and psalms (Eph. 5:19), prayer (1 Cor. 11:4-5), vocal thanksgiving (Eph. 5:20; Heb. 1:15) and instruction (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16).

The corporate worship gathering is not something most pastors or leaders need to be convinced to practice as it is being done as their primary focus. However, in private conversations, more leaders seem to be questioning how and why to gather. The reason gatherings are being questioned is because they see current practices are not developing people as disciples with deep commitment. The worship gathering alone is not developing disciple-makers as well. While there is great value and worship is a part of spiritual development, it takes more than worship service attendance to make disciples. Now it seems that more leaders use worship gatherings to cast vision for the entire community rather than as a focus for discipleship.

The Early Church Practiced Gathering

After Jesus ascended to be with God the Father, the Early Church waited together for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit came down upon them, they moved into action. The first thing Peter does after the Spirit arrives is to preach the Gospel to the crowd. In Acts 3, Peter again preaches the Gospel to a large group. Acts 2:46 demonstrates that the Early Church gathered in the Temple courts daily for prayer. It became a place of gathering for preaching and teaching. Their actions became an extension of John 18:20 as Jesus told the High Priest during the crucifixion that he had preached in the Temple and in synagogues and had kept nothing secret. Acts 2:42-47 gives insight into what life with Jesus and His disciples would have looked like.

42 All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals, and to prayer. 43 A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. 44 And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. 45 They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. 46 They worshiped together at the
Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Church* notes, “Unbelievers are not going to sit through fifty-eight minutes of a service, not just the invitation, must be planned with the unchurched in mind.” In this way, Warren highlights worship services as a gateway for the unchurched to hear and receive the Gospel. As such, worship and evangelism are tied together. In the Gospels, Jesus gathers people and proclaims the Kingdom of God. In Acts, the Early Church did the same thing. As churches today gather people to proclaim the Gospel, those who begin their Christian journey do so in the worship setting rather in a discipling context.

**Jesus Modeled the Small Group Strategy**

In Acts 2:42-47, a community of believers is shown doing life together and on mission together. The description is that of a smaller group of Christ-followers. One may ask about how these disciples picked up on this practice of a sacrificial and missional community. The likely answer is from observing and following what Jesus did with His twelve disciples, the women who were part of the community and the others who were in that extended family. The “others,” as seen in Acts 1:28-26 where the body replaces Judas, indicates a larger group of believers and followers than just the twelve disciples in the small group of Jesus. Peter claims that the replacement is to be one of the men who had been with Jesus from His baptism until His ascension. The church or small group in Acts 2 is simply the type of community that Jesus had already introduced to His followers before Pentecost. In Luke 24:9, the eleven disciples and the “others” are mentioned: “When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the

---

Eleven and to all the others.” Yet, it is uncertain how many were in attendance. The point is, Jesus had both the group that became known as the Apostles and the “others” who were part of His community. Together, they went out proclaiming the Gospel together, serving together, eating together, healing together and ministering together.

The Early Church Practiced Small Groups

The Early Church modeled for the future church what it looks like to be in a community of Christ-followers doing life on mission together. Acts 2:42-47 demonstrates very clearly a community committed to God’s word and to fellowship with each other. There was a clear sense of unity and sacrifice for the good of the whole community rather than a self-focused mentality. The community met each other’s needs, even to the point of selling possessions to meet the needs of others in the community. There was a sense of mission as they went to the temple courts to share the Gospel as many were being added daily to their number (v. 47). In a sense, these followers were “storming the enemy gates” as the temple courts belonged to the religious leaders that made it clear they were not to spread the message of Jesus. This becomes obvious in Acts 4 with Peter and John being commanded to stop spreading the Gospel.

Small groups are critical for the church to fulfill its vision of developing disciples who are living out the mission of God in their lives. Small Groups are not merely smaller in a numerical sense but refers to a more intimate setting where the people of God invest in each other’s lives and meet each other’s needs together as if they were on mission together. Beyond this, there is a missional component to these groups.

What Does It Mean to Be Missional?

“What does it mean to be missional?” needs to be described as it is foundational to forming and deploying missional communities. Alan Hirsch’s helps with the following:
The implicit message church members get from a church that adopts a consumer-driven model (with marketing and all) is that they are essentially discerning consumers and that the local church is a vendor of religions goods and services. No longer is the church a disciple-making medium operating under the Great Commission; rather, the church is viewed as existing to serve my spiritual needs, and if it doesn’t fulfill them according to my particular tastes, then I simply find one that does. In this case, the community exists for me, not me for the community.\(^\text{48}\)

It is important that a small group has a good understanding of what it means to be missional or purpose-oriented before they can effectively become a Small Group. It is more than understanding mission as going overseas or out of town. Being missional means viewing life as the life of a missionary where God has placed His people.

**Jesus Practiced the Mentoring Strategy**

Jesus poured the majority of His life and ministry into the twelve disciples. There was also an inner circle that experienced more intimacy with Jesus. Jesus invited Peter, James and John to come in closer. Jesus then invested in them in a more intense manner. In Matthew 17 and Mark 9, Jesus took these three men on a journey culminating in His transfiguration.\(^\text{49}\) Jesus invited only these three to experience this powerful event. It is an example of Jesus allowing them in a little closer than the other nine disciples. This pattern encourages pastors and church

\(^{48}\) Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, _Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship_ (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 138-139.

\(^{49}\) The importance of the Transfiguration cannot be dismissed in any discussion of discipleship and the mentoring process. The three men that accompanied Jesus to the Transfiguration were deeply affected and their very natures and purposes for living became transformed. Fulton J. Sheen, _Life of Christ_ (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1997), 158-159, notes the following: “when He took with Him to a high mountain Peter, James, and John…all three needed to learn the lesson of the Cross and to rectify their false conceptions of the Messiah…On the mountaintop, after praying, He became transfigured before them…possessed a quality of glory.” This moment was a glimpse of their redemptive future in this moment as Jesus, their mentor became transformed – the goal of discipleship.
leaders to let others in closer and, as indicated, to vary the relationship allowing other Christ-followers into an inner circle. In Luke 9:28, Jesus takes these three to the mountain to pray. As life-on-life relationships are formed, the power of praying with and for each other is essential as it may create an opportunity for a special moment with God.

In Mark 5:37-43, Jesus raises a dead girl and only invited Peter, James and John to accompany Him. In this experience in Mark, these three men experienced and saw what the others did not see and experience. They saw the power of Jesus to bring life (a possible proleptic view of the resurrected Lord) and they were part of this inner circle seeing first-hand what it means to be a Christ-follower. Proverbs 27:17 teaches that a leader allows iron to sharpen iron as a model of how to invest in others on a very personal level. It may be that the American church reality is that life-on-life discipling as modeled here is seen as biblical, but individuals may be afraid to open up to this level of intimacy, or are lazy or reluctant to devote the needed time, or maybe it is a lack of belief in the kind of life Jesus practiced when making disciples. If this emphasis was seen as critical, then churches would change their practices making leader development and disciple-making a priority. Otherwise, the church produces consumers who watch and are not engaged enough to live and die for Christ.

The Early Church Practiced the Mentoring Strategy

In the most basic sense, discipleship is the relationship between a mentor and a mentee. It is the teacher and student relationship. This should inform the pastor and church member relationship. Yet, in the biblical context, the relationship is more in depth and extensive. The biblical experience in discipling demonstrates someone investing their life into another person’s life to impact the information given as well as the actions demonstrated by the disciple. When
Jesus called the disciples, it was not simply to be a learner of His teaching, but to be a doer of what was taught. His disciples were called to live and imitate the life He lived.

Another issue churches have to work on is whether a culture of biblical discipleship is formed. The tendency is to do worship services and other types of church activities. The church should be moving people into the kind of discipling relationships that Jesus practiced with the twelve and even more so with the inner circle of Peter, James and John. These kind of intensive mentoring/discipling relationships Jesus modeled is found in the Gospels and elsewhere in the Bible. Examples are the relationships of Moses and Joshua, Barnabas and Mark, as well as Paul and Timothy.

**Jesus Practiced the Sending Strategy**

Jesus actively practiced serving and ministering to others in His life and ministry. Jesus demonstrated this way of life and trained His followers to live in the way He lived. Matthew 20:28 reminds the reader that He came to serve: “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus also revealed His mission. He was sent by God the Father to accomplish the redemption of man. In Luke 19:10, Jesus said: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” After His resurrection, Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples and gave them a purpose – “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:22b). Finally, in Luke 24:45-49, Jesus told His disciples that they are to be His witnesses in the world and to call people to repent and place their faith in Him. Verses 47-48 state, “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”
The Early Church Practiced the Sending Strategy

The churches pictured Acts and throughout the New Testament are on mission. Their purpose is to impact their world for Jesus. Many of these churches are committed to engaging their culture with the Gospel and sending people on mission. The Thessalonian church exemplifies such a church (1 Thessalonians 1:1 ff.). The Thessalonian church did have its struggles and challenges, but Paul describes it as a church having an impact on the city, region and known world because of their faith, hope and love. This kind of influence made them known and had such an incredible impact on the world. In 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, Paul writes:

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 5 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 6 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 7 The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 8 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 9 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

This is just one example of the powerful impact that the church had as they lived with the mission given by the Father. Their lives exemplified being on mission with and for God. Paul commends them as model believers in sharing the message and living lives, as faithful imitators of Paul and his company and as faithful followers of God in words and deeds.

Practical Application of the Four Strategies Jesus Used forDiscipleship

The four strategies of Jesus for discipleship are evidenced in Scripture and in the practice of the Early Church. The witness is that they figured out how to practically apply Jesus’
teaching. The need is evidenced by current research such as that from the Barna Group that shows the majority of current church leaders do not believe the church is effective in discipling.50 This is a point of concern for this writer as well. The following is a simple and practical way for church leaders to evaluate their discipling culture as they apply the practices and strategies of Jesus in their local church. Figure 1, above, represents the four strategies for discipling. As discipling processes are evaluated, how well the strategies are balanced is of primary concern.

According to Rick Warren in The Purpose Driven Church, the church has five purposes given in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. These five purposes are: Worship, Ministry, Evangelism, Fellowship and Discipleship.51 These five purposes are intrinsic to the four strategies of Jesus in discipleship. Together, the four strategies of Jesus encompass the five purposes of the church.

The Gathering Strategy helps people connect to God and those who are already believers to live and to hear the word of God and to worship God together. The Small Group Strategy helps to connect people in the community/group to the life of the church. As such, it is about serving and doing the ministry of the church.

The Mentoring Strategy connects people in relationship with other Christ-followers on a deeper level for spiritual growth in Christ. The Sending Strategy focuses on sending people out from the main body to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in local communities and in global communities. Individually, these four disciple-making strategies represent values and/or purposes of the church. When all four of the strategies are practiced with balance, a culture of growth and discipleship is cultivated. These strategies can then provide a context for measuring


51 Warren, The Purpose Driven Church, 103-106.
and aid a church in evaluating its ministry. A church can evaluate how well it is making disciples by whether there is a purposeful attempt to make disciples and how well it is following Jesus’ example and teaching.

**Summary**

The genius of Jesus’ four strategies for discipleship is in their simplicity as well as in the ability to utilize them in any ministry context. When utilized in a balanced and holistic manner, a culture that values and fosters discipleship is created in the local church. This chapter utilized snapshots from Scripture showing how Jesus and the Early New Testament church practiced each and the results. Even with the difficulties presented by the North American twenty-first century context, these strategies and the values that are foundational to each can be applied to counter the significant decline of the church and to bring the perceptions of pastors and people in the pews back together in greater alignment. In the following chapter, a deeper look at discipleship in the North American church and its relationship to church growth will be offered.
Chapter Three

Discipleship in American Churches

“I found out the hard way that if we don’t disciple people, the culture sure will.”

– Alan Hirsch

In the previous chapter, the reality of church decline was confirmed by research and with evidence from multiple sources. The same research shows that many church leaders believe this decline, as reflected in the modern church’s inability to reach people and grow numerically, is connected to a lack of effective discipleship. By extension, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that this decline is directly connected to a failure to implement the four strategies that Jesus used to make disciples in a balanced and holistic manner. The four strategies are the Gathered Strategy, the Small Group Strategy, the Mentoring Strategy and the Sending Strategy.

For this project, a survey (see Appendix A) was conducted to inquire about practices of discipleship from within the framework of the four strategies. A total of three hundred churches around the United States were contacted and from this group fourteen completed the survey. The three hundred churches were randomly selected across denominations, styles of worship, size and location. The intention was to have a sample of churches that were varied in size, location, style and affiliation. The survey was completed by pastors from January 2017 to May 2017.

The project’s survey reflects that 7% of the churches surveyed practiced two or less of the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship. The 7% that indicated practicing two or less of Jesus’ strategies saw no numerical church growth (“N/A” numerical church growth in the past two years). Further, any responder reporting no numerical growth claimed to practice none of
the four discipleship strategies. Interestingly, the surveys showed that the churches which indicated a 20% numerical growth were actively practicing all four of the discipleship strategies of Jesus. The major discovery was that if a church practices all four of Jesus’ strategies, then while growth was not guaranteed, the potential for numerical growth was much higher. The responders that indicated no numerical growth did not practice all four strategies.

The survey results showed that 21% of the churches with no numerical growth self-identified as blended in worship style. Further another 21% indicated a 20% growth while self-identifying as contemporary or modern in music style. The survey finds that a contemporary or modern worship style shows a likelihood of more growth than those with blended music.

The Four Discipling Strategies Used by Jesus

The following discusses how Jesus applied the four strategies. The Gathered Strategy is about Jesus gathering people in a larger setting to teach and to worship God and from which they may be sent out or commissioned for a specific purpose. The Small Group Strategy refers to how and when people are intentionally placed in a smaller group of people for learning, community or some sort of purpose - some type of mission for Kingdom of God. The Mentoring Strategy happens when Jesus or an individual practiced life-on-life mentoring with His disciples or with others as a learner or disciple (e.g., Paul and Timothy, etc.). Mentoring is an intensive relationship that in this case focuses on discipleship. The final, Sending Strategy, occurs when Jesus or the larger body sends out disciples in teams for preaching about the Kingdom of God, teaching others about Christ, healing those in need or some sort of service to others. When each strategy for discipleship is engaged, people are positioned for a holistic and all-encompassing experience that fully equips them for their God-called life and purpose. The survey was
constructed from within the framework of Jesus’ four strategies and uses questions to discover how churches apply each strategy. The following explores each strategy.

**The Gathering Strategy**

Out of the fourteen churches responding to the survey, 100% of the churches self-identified as having a worship gathering. An option was given to self-identify the style of worship into one of three categories (traditional, blended, contemporary/modern). A blended worship style brings together traditional Christian worship music and contemporary Christian worship music. A contemporary and modern style refer to virtually the same style. Of the fourteen responding churches, eight self-identify as blended and six self-identify as contemporary/modern. None self-identify as traditional in worship style.

![Figure 2: Worship Style Survey Results](image)

**The Small Group Strategy**

Multiple questions in the survey show how new people became more involved in the church and their engagement. Each church indicated having some sort of process to involve newcomers. Nine of the fourteen churches offered a New Members class to assimilate new people into the church community.

![Figure 3: New Member Class Offering](image)
Finally, 50% of the surveyed churches answered that small groups were the most favored discipleship strategy. Such groups provide fellowship, a more intimate gathering, a place to learn and to be encouraged as disciples, as well as a platform for service in the body of Christ or the larger community whether on a local or global scale.

**The Mentoring Strategy**

Six of the fourteen churches indicated that their churches did not offer mentoring groups. Two of the fourteen responders indicated satisfaction with their discipling process. This means that 86% were not satisfied with their current discipleship methods. One of the churches that indicated satisfaction with its current program indicated that it did not offer mentoring groups.52

**Figure 4: Mentoring Groups and Discipleship Satisfaction**

Being a mentor to another is critically important in the development of a disciple. In the current milieu, people want a mentor and then they want to coach others. This was the case in the Paul and Timothy relationship. As noted by Stroope in *Tribal Church*:

> Every one of us needs both a Paul and a Timothy in our life. We all need to be coaching and mentoring someone new to the faith, and we all need to be the object of some form of coaching and mentoring.53

---

52 Dann Spader, *4 Chair Discipling*, 103, notes that multiplication through mentoring in the American church context is to be the preferred method for growing the church, contrasting with the Church Growth movement that focused on simple growth. The idea he conveys is exponential or compounded growth over time (see his example). The disciple assumes the method and need for self-replication as the primary method of growth.

The Sending Strategy

The survey inquired about the sending strategy of the surveyed churches with questions about the outreach and mission work the church is doing locally and globally. Twelve of the fourteen churches indicated that they offer at least two community outreach events each year. Community outreach events are included here since anytime the church moves outside of its four walls and into the community in an intentional manner for outreach, the authority and mission of the church should be behind it. Also, those individuals engaging in such events are carrying their faith into these places as “sent.” In many churches, those involved are “commissioned” as “missionaries” for the church body and as being on mission for the Kingdom.

2 of the 14 churches offer less than two community outreach events annually
12 of the 14 churches offer at least two community outreach events annually

Figure 5: Church Community Outreach

The sending strategy of the churches is also measured by involvement in local and/or global mission work as an extension into missional settings. Again, those settings may be closer to home – local or they may be out of the country or region – global. Eleven of the fourteen churches indicate that at least 20% of those attending Sunday morning worship gatherings are involved in local mission work. Ten of the fourteen indicate that 5% of Sunday morning worship attendance is involved in the church’s global mission work.
Churches Surveyed That Are Applying All Four Strategies

The churches that self-identified as practicing each of the four discipleship strategies of Jesus were 57% of those surveyed. The eight out of fourteen churches that practiced all four strategies responded by indicating positive numerical growth. These churches have built a culture of discipleship by holistically applying all four strategies of Jesus.

![Figure 6. Churches Practicing All Four Strategies](image)

In “The Decade of Discipleship,” from the C.S. Lewis Institute, it is argued that discipleship needs to be the DNA of today’s church.\(^{54}\) Discipleship, as explained in the article, includes all four of the strategies of Jesus, with different nomenclature for the strategies. This emphasis identified the core of their Fellows Program. This program is a holistic discipleship approach focused on building a culture of discipleship through teaching and fellowship (Gathering Strategy), small group interaction (Small Group Strategy), mentoring (Mentoring Strategy), and service projects (Sending Strategy). Michael Ramsden, the European Director of

\(^{54}\) C.S. Lewis Institute, “The Decade of Discipleship,” 4.
the Zacharias Trust, said, “The Fellows Program of the C.S. Lewis Institute is the finest
discipleship program I’ve seen anywhere in the world.”

The culture of discipleship that the C.S. Lewis article describes and seeks to implement is
summed up by “we need ministries and individual believers to focus on building a culture of
discipleship in our churches.”

In comparison, it is difficult to build a culture of discipleship in American churches when only four out of every ten believers set personal spiritual growth goals.
This means that six out of ten have no sense of what they want to achieve or become.
To build a culture, as the C.S. Lewis Institute describes, it takes an intentional and full-team effort. Yet, with only 40% of church-going Christians desiring a plan for spiritual growth, it is challenging to create and build a discipling culture.

According to an article from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton@Work, “Culture trumps everything.”

It is further stated that changing the factors and conditions that affect the culture rather than directly changing the culture itself should be the focus of leadership.

For the church, focus needs to be on what it takes to cultivate a discipling culture (the factors and conditions), rather than introducing a discipling culture with no foundation. The four strategies of Jesus for discipleship should become the foundational values

55Ibid, 7.
56Ibid, 4.
57Barna, Growing True Disciples, 36.
59Ibid, 2.
of churches. These organizational values consistently practiced over time shape culture. Patrick Lencioni says, “Core Values are the deeply ingrained principles that guide all of a company’s actions: they serve as its cultural cornerstones.” The church is not a company or a business, but the principle still applies. Culture is shaped by what is valued and lived out by the people who make up the organization. The culture that Jesus calls His followers to build is a discipling culture that makes disciples. Culture is created when what is valued is practiced. The values that make up a discipling culture that Jesus practiced and desired for the church are found in the gathered, small group, mentoring and sending strategies.

**Unreached America**

Unreached America needs to be considered in a discussion about discipleship as this country is becoming more secularized and then progressively more unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. David Olson states in *The American Church in Crisis* that church attendance will decline from 52 million in 2005 to 49 million by 2020, while the American population will increase by over 40 million during that same time frame. Currently, it is estimated that in the United States alone over 187 million people are unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This makes the United States the fifth largest unreached nation in the world. Churches on decline have lost almost 3 million people each year with 3500-4000 churches closing their doors each year. Neil Cole states,

---


61 Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 176.

Somewhere in our past we became institutionalized and our church life became busy and complicated with buildings, budgets, buses, and bureaucracy. Not that we shouldn’t be busy, but we have somehow lost sight of the prime directive given by Jesus Himself.63

Mark Dever in *What is a Healthy Church*, states that it is a necessity for every Christ follower to be part of a local body of believers. He says, “When a person becomes a Christian, he doesn’t just join a local church because it’s a good habit for growing in spiritual maturity. He joins a local church because it’s the expression of what Christ has made Him – a member of the body of Christ.”64 As a further sign of American secularism, Thom Rainer, in *The Book of Church Growth*, comments about Biblical literacy,

If Christians believe that most of the nation adheres to biblical beliefs, they are working under a false assumption. The sad truth is that Americans are generally ignorant of the Bible. One poll showed that, while 93 percent of Americans have a Bible in their homes, only 12 percent of all adults read it daily.65

This reality should be of great concern for church leaders and Christians who care for and are directly affected by the state of discipleship in today’s churches.

**The Church Disconnect**

The disconnect between the church and American culture appears to be greater than at any point in our country’s history. In the United States, attitudes toward the church shift from irrelevancy to hostility. Thom Rainer continues in *The Book of Church Growth*:

“Most churches today are irrelevant to most of society. The language, methodology, music, organizations, buildings and sermons typically do not reflect the world in which

---

63 Ibid, 11.

64 Dever, *What is a Healthy Church*, 20.

most people live. A walk into a church (if we really could get them in the front door) would be a trip into a nostalgic past at best and boring irrelevancy at worst."

The impact of what is happening is huge for churches. For example, if new people are not reached, then there are no new people to disciple much less to carry on the His mission. For churches to fix the discipleship problem, it must reach and evangelize a new generation of people who can shift the culture of the church (in general) and then the broader cultural context. Rainer, in *I Could, I Might, I Can, I Should, I Will*, writes about nine ways churches drive away first-time guests. They are:

1. Unfriendly church members
2. Unsafe and unclean children’s area
3. No place to get information
4. Bad church websites
5. Poor signage
6. Insider church language
7. Boring or bad service
8. Members telling guests they are in their seats
9. Dirty facilities

These nine items might seem like surface level issues for churches, but they may become barriers for those coming from outside of the church. For the church to reach new people and engage them in the four discipling strategies of Jesus, any impediment should be dealt with. In some churches impediments may indicate deeper issues in the church. Each item in the list directly connects to complacency or barriers to building relationships with respect to the Gathering Strategy. Paying attention to details in an intentional manner creates an environment for the guest to hear the Gospel of Jesus without distraction, as noted by Rainer. The church should lead

---

66 Ibid, 220.

the way in hospitality and love toward those who are new to it and to the community. The admonition from the writer of Hebrews (13:2) is valid, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

Rainer identifies four “right attitudes” of an externally focused healthy church member in *I Could, I Might, I Can, I Should, I Will.* They are part of a healthy culture. The four-needed right “attitudes” are:

1. The Right Attitude: I am a Unifying Church Member
2. The Right Attitude: I am a Sacrificial Church Member
3. The Right Attitude: I am a Prayerful Church Member
4. The Right Attitude: I am a Joyful Church Member

The four attitudes Rainer suggests may seem on one level to be disconnected from the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship. However, as church members practice Jesus’ strategies, the right attitudes honor God. Paul gives his behavioral guidance in Colossians 3:12-15:

12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

As Christ-followers and church members, the American church needs to practice and teach what a healthy disciple of Jesus looks like and how to live in a broken world.

**Disengagement and The Next Generation**

In *Essential Church* by Thom Rainer, he states that two-thirds of adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two have dropped out of church. He lists ten reasons for why this is so:

1. Wanted a break from church
2. Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical

---

3. Moved to college and stopped attending
4. Work responsibilities prevented me from attending
5. Moved too far away from the church to continue attending
6. Became too busy though still wanted to attend
7. Didn’t feel connected to the people in my church
8. Disagreed with the church’s stance on politics or social issues
9. Chose to spend more time with friends outside the church
10. Was only going to church to please others

The research of Rainer and his team explains some of the reasons people disengage from the church community. Based on their research, young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two do not see the church as an essential part of their lives. Rainer describes the American church as dying and refers to the declining numbers in the largest evangelical denomination, Southern Baptists, as proof. He states that Southern Baptists are baptizing no more than they did in the 1950’s, but the current population is much larger than in the 1950’s.

In *Essential Church*, Rainer points out that seventy-nine percent of all eighteen to twenty-two-year olds staying in the church said their parents provided spiritual guidance. The discipling by parents seems to take a large role in the decision-making and discipling processes regarding church membership and commitment. Further, philosophers are arguing that there is no grand metanarrative uniting all people such as the Gospel and the story of God. This then

---


71 Ibid, 8.

72 Ibid.

seems to have led to the postmodern movement. The resulting effect is a deconstruction of religion and specifically, Christianity.\textsuperscript{74} This has greatly influenced the views of many young adults in this culture and many are questioning “truth.” It has been observed that affected individuals believe that one person’s “truth” is another person’s theory. In return, the authority of the church is undermined.\textsuperscript{75}

In George Barna’s book, \textit{Growing True Disciples}, he includes a chapter on how the church has gotten to where it is. From his research, he gives nine reasons the church has missed the mark: 1) “Few churches or Christians have a clear, measurable definition of spiritual success.” What Barna discovered is that when a church does not have or communicate a clear pathway for people to take on the discipling journey, they end up going nowhere.\textsuperscript{76} 2) “We have defined ‘Discipleship’ as head knowledge rather than complete transformation.” Barna is arguing that the research shows that churches have focused on information and not application for transformation in a holistic way.\textsuperscript{77} 3) “We have chosen to teach people in random rather than systematic ways.” Again, Barna and his team report that the evidence is clear that the church is focused on giving people biblical content, but not on a strategic learning process that focuses on a developmental process customized to the person based on their spiritual position.\textsuperscript{78} 4) “There is virtually no accountability for what we say, think, do or believe.” The lack of accountability is

\textsuperscript{74} Tony Jones, \textit{Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Cultivating Authentic Community, Creating Holistic Connections} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 25.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 26.

\textsuperscript{76} Barna, \textit{Growing True Disciples}, 88.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 88.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 91.
having a great impact on how people live their lives as disciples of Jesus. He says that church leaders focus on the knowledge of people rather than their lives. 5) “When it comes to discipleship, we promote programs rather than people.” There are very few churches that have a process for developing people through coaching or mentoring. Usually, this is handed off to programs that cannot deliver what is needed. 6) “Small groups are the primary method people rely on for spiritual development.” Barna states that churches are using many resources to recruit people to be in groups, but then the investment into leaders leading the groups is neglected. Also, the substance of what is shared in the group is often plagued by the absence of application. 7) “Church leaders are not zealous about the development of people.”

The research points to the fact that many pastors do not make people development a key part of their ministry. If the pastor is not invested in making disciples and making it part of the platform, then developing disciples suffers in the church as a whole. 8) “We invest our resources in adults rather than in children.” Barna believes that the church has neglected discipling children and this is one reason for the current state of the church. Outreach to young families is critically important. Given this, householders are to be discipled, but then children need to be discipled. It is important, for him, that children be discipled by the age of twelve because the vast majority are on a path toward following Jesus or not following Him by that time. 9) “We divert our best leaders to ministries other than discipleship.” Barna’s final reason

79 Ibid, 92.
80 Ibid, 93.
81 Ibid, 94.
82 Ibid, 94-95.
83 Ibid, 96.
why the church is in its current position is that discipleship is not made the main priority and the result is the best leaders are in other ministries. The result is weak discipleship.\textsuperscript{84}

These nine findings from Barna’s research are more than likely not surprising to most church leaders. But too often, churches tend to go down the same road unless discipleship is addressed in an intentional manner. Barna says: “Discipleship is a lifelong calling that demands every resource we will ever muster. Discipleship is about passion to reach our full potential in Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{85} This is to say that church leaders must evaluate the condition of the church that is served and then take steps to lead the church to a different destination. If the church does not continue to make disciples, then the gifting and skills related to evangelism will suffer. Thus, the church will not only not make new disciples, but it will not fulfill the Great Commission.

In \textit{The Shaping of Things to Come}, Frost and Hirsch talk about the bankruptcy of Christendom in the first world. They show that the church is declining in almost every first world context. They believe that the missional church has been and will be the most successful disciple-making vehicle moving forward.\textsuperscript{86} Jim Putman gives a simple three-point overview on what it means to be a disciple as one who is following Christ, being changed by Jesus, and living committed to the Jesus’ mission of salvation. He describes these believers as holistic disciples because they are into Christ with their head, heart, and hands and this is what makes a disciple.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 97-98.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 99.

\textsuperscript{86} Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, \textit{The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission For the 21st-Century Church} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 14.

Summary

The North American church in the twenty first century is facing decline. This new reality, as noted in research, means that the causes for this decline need to be addressed if there is to be a future story for the American church. While there may be many thoughts for an answer, those aware and studying this trend demonstrate that the basic root cause is a lack of effective discipleship in the church. This project’s research has revealed that for those churches surveyed and applying all four strategies of Jesus, there is positive numerical growth in an overall context of diminishing growth.

However, the concern is not merely a numerical concern. The problem is cultural and spiritual. Churches are by and large not cultivating a discipling culture. Further there is a greater disconnect than the pastor and the pew as mentioned earlier. There is a greater disconnect between church and society in terms of relevancy and attitude (see above).

The church can address these concerns if it will intentionally and holistically address discipleship using the four discipling strategies of Jesus. In chapter four, this project will further describe and interpret findings from the survey which is its cornerstone.
Chapter Four

Discipleship Survey Responses from Churches

“You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” — Peter Drucker

This chapter will explore survey results that explain what churches do to make disciples in light of the four strategies of Jesus. The survey responses identified a sampling of the different methods and practices being used by churches to reach people and to make disciples. The results from the questionnaire will be presented, analyzed and evaluated. In conducting the research, over three hundred churches around the United States were randomly selected to complete the survey. Out of this number, fourteen surveys were completed. The three hundred churches were from random denominations, styles, sizes and affiliations. The surveys were completed during the months of January to May 2017.

The following represents what was learned from the surveys that pastors completed about their churches. While this information may not be considered all-inclusive or definitive for all churches, it does give insight into discipleship in the church setting. The results of the survey reveal the challenges church leaders and their congregations are experiencing in disciple-making within a culture that is self-limited by its perception of time or has been spiritually malnourished for decades. The completed surveys were filled out by pastors that hold a Master’s degree or higher. The churches range in membership from 50 to over 4,000.

Analysis of the Disciple-Making Process

The survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) is based on the four strategies of Jesus found throughout this project. The survey asks about leadership structure, worship services, missions and outreach ministries, assimilation of new people and the small group life of the church. Each
question was developed to learn about how different twenty-first century churches may apply the four strategies of Jesus.

**The Gathering Strategy Questions**

Each surveyed church practiced the Gathering Strategy by having at least one weekly worship service. They were asked specific questions about their gathering to gain insight into how they execute the worship gathering. The following question describes the music style of the worship service of the gathered church.

![Figure 7: Q15 – How would you describe your worship/music style?](image)

Out of those surveyed, no church self-identified as traditional in terms of music style. Over 57% identify as blended. Blended refers to a mix of traditional worship music with contemporary worship music. This mixing of styles is the single most important descriptor. The remainder self-identified as either contemporary (29%) or modern (14%) in worship music style.

If a pastor or missionary moved to a new community and church location, one of the first questions to be asked would probably relate to either music style or methods for community outreach. What would be the dominant style, outreach strategy and follow-up process?
Worship style is important (Figure 8) as it is tied to numerical growth. One interesting discovery from the survey is that about 21% of the churches surveyed indicated N/A or minimal/no growth and self-identified as blended in worship style. Another 21% of the surveyed churches chose the 20% or more growth in attendance option. This 21% saw themselves as either contemporary or modern in music style. Those answering this survey with a contemporary/modern music style had greater numerical growth than the stylistically blended.

![Figure 8: Q11 – What percentage has your church-wide attendance grown in the past two years?](image)

The churches responding to the survey practice the Gathering Strategy as part of their effort to make disciples. It seems that every church would gather people into a physical location for teaching or worship and follow the model that Jesus set for His followers. However, with the advent of and wider applications of technology, a trend is taking place with people opting out of physical gatherings and gathering remotely, either through television or web-based applications. It is yet to be seen if this will become a detriment for the church and discipleship.88 According to

---

the American Congregations report, churches with very innovative worship are 11% more likely to grow and 26% more likely to innovate as opposed to those that do not innovate. This reinforces the outcome found in this project’s survey (Figure 8). 89

The Small Group Strategy Questions

The following questions were asked about how a church helps people get engaged involved through a Small Group Strategy. Identification with and joining a Small Group is a part of a church’s assimilation process for new people. The first asks if the church has a process to get people involved through a new member class or something similar. For churches that have such a class, new members are more fully involved. In this manner, the new member may identify preferences and needs so that a better group fit might be made. This helps people to get more fully involved in that specific congregation.

[Figure 9: Q6 – Does your church have a membership class/next steps process for new people?]

The responses from the pastors of the surveyed churches indicated that 36% do not have a formal membership/next steps process. The remainder (64%) do have a formal membership/next steps process for new people. There is a direct correlation between people having access to a process for assimilation and the numerical growth of the church.

![Figure 10: Q 7 – What percentage of your Sunday attendance is in small groups (example size 10-30)?](image)

The next Small Group Strategy question is specifically about small group involvement in the surveyed churches. The results provide an interesting insight as 64% of the surveyed churches state that 80-90% of those attending are in small groups. However, church leaders, represented in Figure 12, stated that over 70% were not satisfied to frustrated with their discipleship processes. From Figure 11, the insight was gleaned that 50% of the pastors indicated small groups were the most important part of their discipleship program. So of the surveyed churches, the majority of members are in small groups. Further, the value of the small group is noted at about 50%. Yet, over 70% were not satisfied to frustrated with their current discipleship emphasis. However, the majority of people are engaged more quickly through a Small Group Strategy.
Figure 11: Q 16 – Which is the most important for disciple-making in your church?

Figure 11 reports what surveyed churches believe to be the most important disciple-making strategy. Almost 29% believe the worship service is most important and slightly over 14% indicate a none-listed preference. There were 50% that indicated small groups as being the most important for disciple-making and 7% indicated huddle/mentoring groups (2-5 people) as the most valued. From the survey’s raw data, it was found that 66% of churches with 20% of the numerical growth chose a Small Group Strategy for disciple-making.

Figure 12: Q 8 – Are you satisfied with your current discipleship process?
Question 8 asks churches if they are satisfied with their current discipleship process. From the responders, the pastors relayed a lower level of satisfaction with the discipleship process in their current churches. The results were 7% were very satisfied with their church’s process. It also showed 21% were satisfied and 57% as not satisfied. The last 14% were frustrated. This shows how church pastors view what their respective church is doing in disciple-making. As the raw data from the surveys is reviewed, it will show that many of these churches do not have a holistic discipleship approach and that they are not satisfied or frustrated in response to their disciple-making efforts.

According to Aaron Earls in *Culture Change*, people in small groups are more engaged in their church and grow more spiritually according.\textsuperscript{90} From his research, survey results note that 73% of group attenders are intentionally putting their spiritual gifts to use serving God and others versus the remainder. He also notes that churchgoers belonging to a group are more likely to go to church at least four times per month (79%) and to read the Bible daily (28%). Being in a group impacts people’s daily lives. Group members feel closer to God (69%), understand the Bible better (74%), trust God more (66%) and become more loving in their relationships (48%).\textsuperscript{91} Earls states, “In other words, groups provide environments for people to grow in Christ. A call to discipleship and spiritual maturity is a call to biblical community.”\textsuperscript{92} These results challenge church leaders to follow the strategies of Jesus and get people connected in a small group.


\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92}Ibid.
The Mentoring Strategy Questions

The survey also includes an emphasis on mentoring groups as described in the project and as based on the practice of Jesus intentionally investing in Peter, James, and John. The reason the question is asked about gender specific groupings is because it is the way these groups are recorded in the Bible.

![Bar chart showing responses to Q 5]

**Figure 13: Q 5 – Does your church have groups of 2-5 adults that are gender specific to intentionally develop disciples in your disciple-making process?**

The responses show that 57% of responding churches stated that they have an intentional process for making disciples using mentoring groups. This is the model Jesus used with Peter, James and John. Further, Paul modeled an intentional investment into the life of Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila, with so many more. The remainder of churches in the survey did not identify a process for life-on-life discipleship.

The Sending Strategy Questions

The sending strategy as referred to in this project is based on the times when the disciples were sent out to serve others and to share the Gospel. The survey included questions on the topics of outreach and mission sending both locally and globally in the church.

The next few questions are about the churches’ focus on local and global outreach. The results from question 14 indicate that most of the surveyed churches engage in two to four
outreach events per year (churches sponsoring two, three, or four events each respond at 29%).

Such events are usually service-oriented and focused on community-wide outreach. Only 7% of the churches host just one outreach event per year. The remaining 7% report “other.”

![Figure 14: Q14 – How many community-wide outreach events does your church do annually?](image)

Churches that send people on global missions are usually committed to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). The surveys reveal that 79% send members out globally. Some (7%) rate themselves as engaged, sending 20% of members out globally. About 36% of churches send 10% and another 36% send 5%. The remaining 21% responded with “other.”

![Figure 15: Q4 – What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in global mission trips?](image)
Participation in global missions can be challenging for churches and church members because of the travel, costs and other types of resources involved in sending people far away. Global missions can be a great way for churches to develop people’s leadership skills and to engage in disciple-making opportunities. The same is true for local missional efforts. Question 2 (Figure 16) shows that 14% of the surveyed churches indicated that 60% of their congregations are involved in local mission outreach efforts. For the remainder, 36% indicated that 40% of the congregation members are involved in local mission efforts. Another 36% indicated a 20% involvement. Together, the responses show 86% of the churches see 20-60% of church attendees are involved in local missions. The remaining 14% indicated other.

![Figure 16: Q 2 – What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in local mission work?](image)

Typically, global mission trips have a positive impact on the disciple’s life and experience. According to The Barna Group, “Only one-quarter of those who have participated on such a trip said it was “just an experience.” The majority indicated that such events were life changers in

---

a specific way meaningful to them. The most common areas of personal growth that people recall, even years later – include becoming more aware of other people’s struggles (25%), learning more about poverty, justice or the world (16%), increased compassion (11%), deepened or enriched faith (9%), broadened spiritual understanding (9%) and boosted financial generosity (5%). Others mentioned the experience helped them feel more fulfilled, be more grateful, develop new friends and pray more.”

These findings are positive results that lead to spiritual growth in the lives of those who participate in short-term and global mission trip experiences.

**Conclusion of the Survey**

The survey demonstrates that from responding church leaders, the majority are trying to implement a holistic discipling process. There were only 7% of those responding that practiced only two or less of the four discipling strategies of Jesus. The 7% that indicated the practice of only two of the strategies of Jesus indicated N/A numerical growth in the past two years. Also, for any church indicating N/A growth, none were practicing all four of the strategies of Jesus. On the other hand, the churches indicating 20% growth were actively practicing all four of the strategies of Jesus. However, if a church practices all four of the strategies, growth is not guaranteed, but the potential for growth is much higher.

A church committed to holistic and balanced discipleship including all four of the strategies used by Jesus has a greater potential for numerical growth. Rick Warren taught in *The Purpose Driven Church* that most churches only focus on one of its purposes. When each environment or strategy is seen in light of Jesus’ story and that of the Early Church, what is

---

94 Ibid.
shown is that disciples are made in the context of the church’s five purposes: worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship. He states that “A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a Great Church.”95

The strategies churches use to move people into environments that are conducive to growth gives a church the opportunity to practice the five purposes of the church that Jesus and the Early Church practiced. They gathered to worship, they practiced biblical community for fellowship and ministry, they practiced life-on-life discipleship and fellowship, and lastly, they practiced local and global missions for evangelism and ministry. The “what” to do are the five purposes of worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and discipleship.

Summary

Each of the churches practicing the four strategies of Jesus self-identified that they saw at least a 5% numerical growth over a two-year period. Each growing church applied the four strategies of Jesus (gathering, small group, mentoring, sending) to their own twenty-first century context. The results from the survey indicate that when these four strategies are applied, the results are positive as compared to the trends indicated for the church and its decline in chapter one. On the other hand, those churches that did not apply the four strategies reported no numerical growth. In the next and final chapter, the findings will be brought together. The statistical environment discussed demonstrates that positive change needs to take place and that discipleship practices should be examined as part of these changes. Jesus’ wisdom in bringing people together in different contexts and for purposes is exemplified in the four strategies. The holistic and balanced application of these strategies is needed going forward.

95Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church, 102.
Chapter Five

The Four Strategies Going Forward

“Every church needs to grow warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship, and larger through evangelism.”

– Rick Warren

This project has explored the importance and need for a balanced and holistic discipleship approach for churches. Throughout, the focus has been developing healthy Christ-followers and healthy churches by applying the four strategies that Jesus used to make disciples – sending, small groups, mentoring and sending. From multiple sources, it is clear that the church is declining numerically. There is also a disconnect between pastors and the people in the pew regarding how effective churches are in making disciples. The opinion of many church leaders is that this is happening due to the lack of an effective discipleship model and church culture.96

The picture of the North American church’s decline is shown by David Olson who reports that the percentage of Americans attending church on any given weekend has diminished from 20.4% in 1990 to 17.5% in 2005.97 Looking even deeper, Barna notes that “only 20 percent of Christian adults are involved in some sort of discipleship activity.”98 Olson demonstrates that the decline of the church in America is due to a discipleship problem and he is attempting to address what can be done to stop and reverse this decline. Considering these indicators show a lack of engagement with the church, would an intentional and holistic approach to discipleship that

96 David T. Olson, The American Church in Crisis, 36.

97 Ibid, 36.

builds a more engaging church culture be part of what will help the church gain on its losses and reassert its relevance in the twenty first century? If so, then an intentional and holistic usage of the four strategies could be the way forward in transforming the values and cultures of churches in the twenty first century North American context.

One challenge related to the decline of the twenty first century church is the disconnect between those attending church and those who lead the church. Christian adults that were surveyed by the Barna Group believe that their church effectively disciples believers. Noting that 52% agree with the statement “definitely does a good job helping people grow spiritually.” However only 1% of church leaders agree with the statement “churches today are doing very well at discipling new and young believers.” This creates a unique challenge when many congregants believe that things are working and church leaders believe that the process is broken. Barna also notes that 73% of church goers believe that their church places “a lot” of emphasis on spiritual growth and are satisfied. Yet, only 8% of surveyed pastors said that they are doing “very well” discipling new believers and are satisfied.”

According to Ogden,

The process of disciple-making should be viewed in terms of a parent’s investment in a child who is nurtured through states of infancy, childhood, adolescence and finally into adulthood. Making disciples will only occur when we change our thinking from a quick fix to a long-term life investment. In the long run the results are both deeper and numerically greater.

Chapter one argues that the American church is in crisis. It describes the prevalence of a culture characterized by the church’s numerical decline and the disconnect between what pastors and typical church members believe about discipleship as a significant element in the church’s

---


100 Zylstra, et al, “Pastors and Pews.”

101 Greg Ogden, Discipleship Essentials, 221.
decline. The muddled culture of the twenty-first century church results in an imbalance as the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship are not applied or are held out of balance with each other. Chapter two describes how Jesus’ four strategies were used to create a discipling culture. These, when all applied in a holistic and balanced manner, create a culture of discipleship in the church. The four strategies used by Jesus for discipleship transcend and are applicable in various cultures, demographics and generations. These four strategies can be applied in all church settings and in every context. This project’s goal is to show how discipleship based on Jesus’ strategies may contribute to the solving of the discipleship and culture problem that has been identified. If churches will correct their courses, they can accomplish God’s purposes as they apply the four strategies Jesus used in His ministry.

Research was introduced in chapter three and the opinions of current leaders in the fields of church leadership and church discipleship were presented. For example, those that have researched discipleship such as David Olson, Thom Rainer and Neil Cole were reviewed. Each author reinforces the importance of discipleship by giving further examples of the challenges churches face in the discipleship and reaching of people. David Olson states in *The American Church in Crisis* that church attendance will continue to decline from 52 million in 2005 to 49 million by 2020, while the American population will increase by over 40 million during that same time period.¹⁰² Currently, in the United States over 187 million people are unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With this being the case, the United States is the fifth largest nation in the world and will remain largely unreached. Churches are on the decline with the loss of almost 3 million people per year and with 3500-4000 churches closing their doors every year.¹⁰³

---

¹⁰² Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 176.

Thom Rainer says,

Most churches today simply are irrelevant to most of society. The language, methodology, music, organizations, buildings and sermons typically do not reflect the world in which most people live. A walk into a church (if we really could get them in the front door) would be a trip into a nostalgic past at best, and boring irrelevancy at worst.¹⁰⁴

In chapter four, the results of this project’s survey were given. The findings from the surveyed churches were mixed in their approach to discipleship and in their results. Not all surveyed churches practiced the four strategies of Jesus. Yet, some did. The ones who were not practicing all four strategies, reported less numerical growth than those that did. For the churches that indicated N/A growth, none were practicing the four strategies. On the other hand, those that indicated a 20% growth rate or higher, actively practiced each of the four strategies. Further, the churches that were practicing the four strategies had at least 5% growth. So, over a two-year period, the churches experiencing 5% or higher growth practiced Jesus’ four strategies for disciple-making. Each of these churches figured out how to take the strategies, apply them into their twenty first century context and experienced growth.

**Application of the Four Strategies Further Explained**

It is important to know that the four strategies of Jesus are a blue print for how a church should holistically disciple people. However, the process is not a concrete one as each church must be flexible enough and savvy enough to interpret each context for application of the four strategies. Each context is unique, each generation is different, and every culture has different ways of engaging the Gospel. So, there may be unique applications for each strategy. For example, those living in the United States in the twenty-first century will find unique

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 220.
applications to reach people and will have to understand the current cultural context so that the best parts of those cultures may be used as bridges for communication and relationships. Cultural application is the essence of missiology. Its purpose is to bring people living in a certain way, those who follow Christ and the gospel together. Jesus’ methods transcend and speak to any generation, culture, place or people. Ed Stetzer says,

> Missiology is accomplished at the intersection of gospel, culture, and the church. It is a multi-disciplinary study that incorporates theology, anthropology/sociology, and ecclesiology. A missiologist comes alongside the church and helps her think critically about the task of contextualization. As a missiologist, I argue that the church should aim for a balanced approach in which the interaction with people and culture is both compatible with biblical truth and sensitive to particular people groups. In other words, the church should proclaim and embody the gospel in ways that are biblical, faithful, meaningful, and conversational.\(^\text{105}\)

The challenge for each church is to take the blueprint Jesus gives throughout His ministry and His word and then to apply these four strategies in the context of the local church in such a way that works to accomplish the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

**The Gathering Strategy and The Reveal Study**

The Gathering Strategy is one of the four strategies that each of the surveyed churches practice. There were 57% of churches identifying as blended in worship style. Blended is a mix of traditional style worship music with contemporary music. The other churches respondents identified as contemporary (29%) and modern (14%) stylistically. One finding from the survey was that 21% of the churches indicated 20% growth and each of these identified as contemporary or modern in music style. The survey indicates that churches with contemporary or modern worship music style saw more numerical growth than those that are blended in music style.

---

Understanding the importance of the Gathering Strategy and some of the current trends as noted above provides a basis for findings from the Reveal study. Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson demonstrate that worship gatherings are one of the top six organized church activities that advance a person’s spiritual growth.\(^\text{106}\) The gathering of believers is something Jesus practiced in John 18:19-20. These two verses show Jesus speaking with the High Priest. He speaks publicly about the Kingdom of Heaven and His purposes on earth. These two verses underscore how Jesus talked about His teaching in public and that He gathered crowds to hear Him teach (John 18:19-20). Also, the Early Church practiced gathering as demonstrated in Acts 2:42-47. The passage in Acts describes the early practices of the church and how the disciples would have continued practicing a way of life that Jesus would have trained them to follow prior to His ascension. In verse 46, it is described how the group gathered daily in the temple courts, which was a public place. They worshiped, preached and prayed in the temple courts. These activities practiced in a public forum contributed to the numerical increase they experienced as a sign of God’s favor. Scripture teaches that the gathering of Christ’s followers to worship the Lord resulted in spiritual growth and numerical growth as seen in Acts 2.

**The Small Group Strategy and The Reveal Study**

Each of the churches surveyed applied the Small Group Strategy of Jesus in some manner. Christians being in community together is a foundational biblical teaching. In Acts 2:42-47, scripture demonstrates the Christ-followers’ commitment to other community members and to the mission of God. They met each other’s needs, sacrificed for each other, worshipped together, fellowshipped as a family and prayed together. Hebrews 10:24-25 notes that the church should

not neglect gathering together. The church is directed to spur each other onward and to be encouraged. These commands are difficult to follow when community building is neglected. Hawkins and Parkinson demonstrate that being actively involved in a small group is the third most important church activity for a person to advance in spiritual growth.\textsuperscript{107}

**The Mentoring Strategy and The Reveal Study**

Mentoring groups were offered by 57\% of the surveyed churches. Matthew 17:1-13 portrays the special investment Jesus made into the lives of Peter, James and John. These three men were invested in by Jesus at a deeper level. Also, Jesus engaged them in experiences that the other disciples did not experience first-hand.\textsuperscript{108} In Mark 5:21-23, when Jesus healed the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader, he allowed only Peter, James and John to go with Him into the room where the girl would be healed. They were witnesses to this miracle. It appears that Jesus used His mentoring strategy as a leadership pipeline. The biblical narrative shows that those who took on leadership roles after His resurrection were the three he mentored as over against the other twelve disciples. According to Hawkins and Parkinson, mentoring is the second most important factor that advances the Christ-follower from what was described in their study as “close to Christ” and as “moving to being Christ-centered.” They use the term spiritual mentor to describe the person that leads others into a relationship that is fully Christ-centered.\textsuperscript{109}

**The Sending Strategy and The Reveal Study**

Acts shows Jesus giving His followers the command to live their lives as missionaries. He charges them to represent Him to others (Acts 1:8). Mark 16:15 commands Christ’s followers to

\textsuperscript{107} Hawkins and Parkinson, *Reveal*, 114-115.

\textsuperscript{108} Matthew 17:1-13.

\textsuperscript{109} Hawkins and Parkinson, *Reveal*, 121.
go to the entire world and proclaim Jesus’ message. The disciples of Jesus have been given a mission and purpose. The filling of the Holy Spirit enables the accomplishment of great things (John 20:21-23) like the forgiveness of sins. For Hawkins and Parkinson, evangelism is the most important factor that contributes to spiritual growth and in being Christ-centered. One challenge in this project is to find out how churches are sending their people in a strategic manner for the purposes of evangelism. Assumptions could be made without support of the project’s survey. It shows that most of the surveyed churches do send people on global mission experiences. The survey finds that 7% rank themselves as highly engaged globally with 20% engaged in a global mission activity. Other indicators show 36% of the surveyed churches have 10% engaged and another 36% have 5% engaged in mission activities.

### The Purpose Driven Model and The Four Strategies

Churches committed to implementing a holistic and balanced discipleship process utilizing all four of Jesus’ strategies find common ground with principles from *The Purpose Driven Church* model. Rick Warren proposes that the five purposes of the church are worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and discipleship. He says that “A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a Great Church.”

The strategies used today to move people into environments ready for growth allow individuals the opportunity to practice the five purposes of the church. This strategy is what Jesus and the Early Church did. They gathered for worship, practiced biblical community for fellowship and ministry, practiced life-on-life discipleship and fellowship, and practiced local

---

and global missions for evangelism and ministry. The “what” a church is to do is encompassed by the five purposes of worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and discipleship.

Each of these five purposes are paralleled by Jesus’ four strategies for discipleship. They point out thematic similarities and help in developing a strategic model for making and discipling Christ-followers. The Gathering Strategy includes worship and evangelism. The Small Group Strategy includes fellowship and ministry. The Mentoring Strategy includes discipleship and fellowship. The Sending Strategy includes evangelism and ministry.

**The Up-In-Out Triangle and The Four Strategies**

The four strategies used by Jesus for discipleship transcend cultures, demographics and generations. They can be applied in every church and context. This project has demonstrated that by not emphasizing one element of church life, discipleship, the North American church is in decline. In response, much can be accomplished to reverse this decline by applying Jesus’ teaching and methodology for discipleship. Breen and Cockram devised the Up-In-Triangle to use when a church evaluates its usage of the four strategies (Figure 16).\(^{111}\)

Utilizing the Up, In and Out Triangle, a church may ascertain how the four strategies of Jesus are lived out in practice and in balance within its ministry context. “Up” is the gathered church in its worship gatherings engaging people in a culturally appropriate manner. “In” is the church intentionally involving people through community-based learning groups (or their like). Also, “In” is the church identifying mentors to engage in life-on-life discipling or in small mentoring groups. “Out” represents the church sending people through outreach events and

---

\(^{111}\)Breen and Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 63-64
people being sent locally and globally to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Together, when these triangles and the strategies are balanced, a discipling culture is created.

![Figure 17: The Up-in-Out Triangle and the Discipling Culture](image)

The Up-In-Out Triangle (Figure 16) has a central triangle that represents a discipling church’s culture. A discipling church incorporates the values and strategies of a discipling culture in all that it does. A discipling culture helps a church fulfill the Great Commission. For Breen and Cockram, a church that lives up (intimacy with God), in (intimate relationships with others) and out (living a purposeful life of evangelism) is a discipling church.¹¹²

Churches practicing Up, In and Out incorporate the four strategies of Jesus in all it does. By comparison and contrast, a church should inventory its culture and adjust as needed. Each strategy is applied in balance just as the triangles are balanced. Ensuring balance is another measure of effective discipleship in the local church. Breen and Cockram write, “There is no

secret formula to church growth. All healthy churches, small groups, and ministries grow. To be healthy, you must be in relational balance as pictured in: Up-In-Out. It really is that simple."

The four strategies used by Jesus for discipleship transcend cultures, demographics and generations. They can be applied in every church and in every context. The goal of this project is to demonstrate how the lack of emphasis on discipleship has affected the North American church and to help churches see that they can accomplish God’s purpose for their church by applying Jesus’ teaching and methodology for discipleship implicit in the four strategies (gathering – Up; small group – In/Out; mentoring – In; sending – Out).

**The Bold Moves Four-Step Process**

Craig Etheredge’s book, *Bold Moves*, describes discipleship not as a program but a process. His four step process or four phases includes engaging explorers as phase one. The second phase is connecting believers. The third phase is to grow believers. The final and fourth phase is to go multiply. These four phases compare to the four strategies described in this project. Etheredge’s Engaging Explorers phase may be compared to the Gathered Strategy as Jesus gathered people in a larger setting to teach and to worship God before they are sent out. The Small Group Strategy is like the Connecting Believers phase with people gathered in community or smaller gatherings for a kingdom purpose. When Jesus practiced life-on-life mentoring with His disciples, it compares to the Grow Disciples phase. The Sending Strategy, like when Jesus sent out His disciples, is like phase four, *Go Multiply*.115

---

113 Ibid, 64.


115 Ibid.
Conclusion

Each strategy is individually important for understanding the discipleship methodology that Jesus employed. When all four are applied in a holistic and balanced manner in the context of the local church, traction against the church’s declining trends is created. This traction creates an opportunity to build a discipleship culture with numerical growth in the church being a potential result. From survey results in chapter four, the churches that report a 20% growth actively practice all four discipleship strategies employed by Jesus (Figure 8). The most significant finding of the project is that if a church practices each of the four strategies of Jesus, numerical growth is not guaranteed but the potential for growth is much higher. The churches that self-reported no growth did not practice the four strategies. Figure 5.3 demonstrates that a culture in which discipleship thrives occurs when all four strategies are employed. The survey results indicate that a church’s numerical growth may occur when disciples are made.

The data from the survey shows that only seven percent of the churches surveyed practice two or less of the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship. This seven percent, indicated N/A or none for numerical growth in the church for the prior two years. Further the raw data from the survey showed that each of these churches indicating N/A growth, were not practicing the four strategies of Jesus. On the other hand, the churches indicating 20% or more in growth were actively practicing each of the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship in a balanced and intentional manner.

With a case having been made for the inclusion of Jesus’ four discipling strategies into the culture of a church to bring about revitalization, how can this emphasis and culture be
implemented to bring about needed changes and renewed health for a church?\textsuperscript{116} The foregoing has shown that when the four strategies, or the models related to the four strategies, are implemented, health and effectiveness are vastly improved. It is a matter of practicing discipleship the way Jesus did. Churches engaged in congregational revitalization or leaders involved in creating a discipling culture, should take into account a process of evaluation and change. The following Five Stages for Building a Healthy Church is based on this writer’s experience in leadership and congregational revitalization.

![Five Stages for Building a Healthy Church](image)

**Figure 18: Five Steps for Building a Healthy Church**

These steps are very similar to what a business leader or a new pastor would implement upon taking a new position. Often a new or incumbent pastor will be challenged to revitalize or refocus a church. The Five Steps for Building a Healthy Church is a general framework for

\textsuperscript{116} See Appendix B.
specific action plans. To get a benchmark, a thorough evaluation is needed to gain a picture of the church’s current culture and discipleship process. From this benchmark, a pathway for implementing and hardwiring the four discipling strategies of Jesus can be developed.

Step one is a thorough evaluation to develop a baseline. The following areas of consideration can be accomplished quickly. Attention to what is learned and recording it is helpful. Different learnings about church polity, demographics, history, current data, and culture will help. Polity guides how the church operates and how change may be implemented. It is also helpful to learn what is unwritten from lay leaders and staff members. Demographics help to develop a church profile and a community profile. From the demographics, insights may be gained about ministry needs and ministry competencies. A study of the church’s history is very helpful to gain and interpret what is being learned and what is practiced. The church’s history also says a great deal about its culture and operations. Current data gives a snapshot of trends and possibilities for developing the church’s ministry. The best data is trends over time. This step is to become thoroughly familiar with the church’s current culture and how it lives out its values, mission and vision. This information can be gleaned from written records but is more helpful when gathered in real time from church members.

When evaluating a church’s health, it is helpful to gain written records, but often more valuable information is gathered from an interview format, like a one-on-one conversation or from within a group setting with a formalized response. The questions in Figure 19 are illustrative of the types of questions that may be used or adapted to suit a particular context. Questions that account for the four discipleship strategies of Jesus and that may be answered with a quantifiable response and segmented by various factors (age, group type, gender, etc.) across the congregation are most useful.
Step two is the development and implementation of a 100-Day Plan. These are action plans to make an immediate impact as findings are developed and shared with the community. When a culture shift is expected, plans for immediate impact, a sense of expectancy and influence are needed quickly. The following elements should be included. Listen to a wide range of people’s stories and share the kernels of the new vision. Incorporate the four strategies of Jesus into a preaching plan. Specifically visit with leaders and shadow what they do. As listening occurs, look for the top 2-3 commonly held core values. A leader is to actively listen and value what is learned.

Step three is to develop and implement a 365-Day plan based on what has been learned. This step includes longer-termed action plans. These action items focus on identity, culture building and change implementation. A holistic and balanced discipleship model will be implemented incorporating Jesus’ four strategies for discipleship not currently in place. A staff
retreat will build trust and build team cohesiveness around common values. Implement a plan for small groups throughout the church. Evaluate, initiate, stop and expand as appropriate current mission partner relationships. Continue to hardwire the four strategies and listen broadly.

Step four is intentional organizational alignment in year 2 and beyond. Organizational alignment helps to facilitate and monitor changes. The senior church leader’s task is to ensure continually that the church is in alignment. The senior leader will guide programming, practices, goals and measures to become aligned with the four discipling strategies. Further, branding, communication delivery and basic church processes will incorporate the four strategies of Jesus for discipling. This step needs to be permeated with active listening by key leaders.

Step five includes ongoing evaluation, learning, accountability and adjustment. The key issues include stopping outdated programs, initiating new values-centric initiatives and to developing leaders for living out the four strategies of Jesus for discipleship. The implementation of change and restoration of church health can be accomplished with a healthy culture and a focus on what Jesus taught. In this case, the four discipling strategies of Jesus help to provide a roadmap for the church to follow in living out its culture, ministry and most of all – discipleship.


Etheredge, Craig. *Bold Moves: Lead the Church to Live Like Jesus*. Colleyville, TX: discipleFirst, 2016.


Appendix A: Church Leadership Survey

1. How often does your church engage the congregation in local mission work?
   - o A. Monthly
   - o B. Bi-monthly
   - o C. Quarterly
   - o D. Annually
   - o E. Other _________

2. What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in local mission work?
   - o A. 80%
   - o B. 60%
   - o C. 40%
   - o D. 20%
   - o E. Other _________

3. How often does your church engage the congregation in global mission trips?
   - o A. Monthly
   - o B. Bi-monthly
   - o C. Quarterly
   - o D. Annually
   - o E. Other _________

4. What percentage of your Sunday morning worship attendance is engaged in global mission trips?
   - o A. 30%
   - o B. 20%
   - o C. 10%
   - o D. 5%
   - o E. Other _________

5. Does your church have groups of 2-5 adults that are gender specific to intentionally develop disciples in your disciple-making process?
   - o A. Yes
   - o B. No

6. Does your church have a membership class/next steps process for new people?
   - o A. Yes
   - o B. No
7. What percentage of your Sunday attendance are in small groups (example size 10-30)?
   - A. 90%
   - B. 80%
   - C. 70%
   - D. 60%
   - E. Other ________________________

8. Are you satisfied with your current discipleship process?
   - A. Very satisfied
   - B. Satisfied
   - C. Not satisfied
   - D. Frustrated

9. How long do your 2-5 people sized groups meet together before they multiply to start new groups?
   - A. One Year
   - B. 9 months
   - C. 6 months
   - D. Other ____________
   - Does Not Apply

10. How is your church led?
    - A. Staff led
    - B. Lay Elder led
    - C. Congregation led
    - D. None of the above

11. What percentage has your church-wide weekend attendance grown in the past two years?
    - A. 20%
    - B. 15%
    - C. 10%
    - D. 5%
    - E. N/A

12. How many semesters do you schedule for small groups each year?
    - A. Continuous
    - B. 2
    - C. 3
    - D. N/A
    - E. ____________
13. Where do your small groups meet?
   o A. On-campus at the church
   o B. Off-campus
   o C. Both
   o D. N/A

14. How many community-wide outreach events does your church do annually?
   o A. One
   o B. Two
   o C. Three
   o D. Four
   o D. Other _______________

15. How would you describe your worship/music style?
   o A. Traditional
   o B. Blended
   o C. Contemporary
   o D. Modern

16. Which is the most important for disciple-making in your church?
   o A. Worship Services
   o B. Mission Effort
   o C. Small Groups
   o D. Huddle Groups (2-5 people)
   o E. None of the Above

17. Does your church have a guest follow-up process?
   o A. Yes
   o B. No

18. How many salvations has your church seen in the past two years? _______________

19. How many baptisms has your church seen in the past two years? _______________

20. What is your church-wide weekend average attendance? _________________________

21. Did your lead/senior pastor complete a master’s degree from a seminary?
   o A. Yes
   o B. No
Appendix B: Vaughn Forest Church: A Case Study

This project’s author is the Lead Pastor of Vaughn Forest Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Vaughn Forest Church had been on a nine-year numerical decline from 2007-2015 and is an excellent example of a church that was in need of revitalization and refocus on its mission. From its highest weekly attendance of 1300 persons, it had declined to 850 persons and had lost touch with its larger community. At the end of 2015, this author began his tenure at the church. One of the first tasks he completed was to ensure that the focus of the staff team members and the lay leadership team was to build a discipling culture. Both teams intentionally began to implement the four strategies of Jesus within the Vaughn Forest Church community.

These four strategies used by Jesus are the Gathered Strategy, the Small Group Strategy, the Mentoring Strategy and the Sending Strategy. The worship gatherings at Vaughn Forest Church were evaluated and updated to incorporate lessons from the four strategies of Jesus. A major focus was to revise the worship experience to reflect current worship trends. The goal was to improve and to bring it to a higher standard of excellence. Other group gatherings were also measured by the four strategies. Some gatherings were newly created and some were eliminated. The Small Group Strategy was applied to the life of Vaughn Forest Church through a Life Groups emphasis. These groups are offered both on- and off- campus at various times throughout the week to engage more people in small groups. One innovative approach to the curriculum used by the small groups has been different lesson series that reinforce culture and emphasizes the missional aspects of the church. In this way, this culture change was reinforced not only in worship but in small group settings. The mentoring strategy was non-existent until the four strategies were implemented. At Vaughn Forest Church a new emphasis on intentional mentoring through life-on-life experiences and mentoring was initiated. These were called 3-D
Groups. The purpose of these groups has been to take leadership and learning to a deeper level. These groups have also become the pipeline used by the Executive Leadership team to recruit and train church leaders. The Sending Strategy focused on how Jesus sent His disciples to serve others in teams and to share the gospel. Vaughn Forest applied this strategy by increasing community awareness and evaluated all local and global partnerships. One outcome was an increase in mission opportunities on a global basis. Further, the local mission emphasis capacity has been increased to be more strategic in the Montgomery community and Alabama’s River Region. Buy-in from the congregation has been accomplished by intentionally emphasizing how their offerings have an impact on other people’s lives locally and globally. Another strategy has been to pray for and commission teams in worship. Follow-up occurs using verbal and media-based reports in worship. With these and many other action plans, each of the four strategies became the basis for all that Vaughn Forest does as a church. The Leadership team works intentionally to have balance between the four values/strategies to build a culture of discipleship.

The results of implementing the four strategies of Jesus has produced numerical growth, increased engagement in discipleship and a greater impact in the Montgomery community and beyond. During its first two years of practicing the four strategies, Vaughn Forest’s weekly worship attendance increased from an average of 850 in weekly attendance to an average of 1200 lives being touched weekly. This was a 41% increase numerical growth.

Vaughn Forest also saw a dramatic increase in the involvement of people in its Life Groups. The church saw a 40% increase in the total amount of people involved in Life Groups. In 2015, six hundred and forty-three people were involved in life groups and in 2017, nine hundred were involved. The church’s leadership worked intentionally to involve more people through Vaughn Forest’s Life Groups with a substantial overall increase of people involved.
Vaughn Forest Church added what is called 3-D Groups during these two years and has involved one hundred and forty people in these groups. Prior to this addition, the church did not practice mentoring or life-on-life discipling. While the direct results throughout the church from this strategy may be difficult to determine, there has been an increased involvement in life-on-life discipling throughout the church. Further the number and quality of leaders willing to be engaged has grown to become a vibrant and engaged group of leaders. The Vaughn Forest Leadership Team attributes much of its improvement and revitalization to its 3-D Groups.

The Sending Strategy of Jesus has been directly applied at Vaughn Forest Church in two measurable ways. The first was to improve on the quality of the church’s community outreach events and the second was to increase awareness of local and global outreach opportunities. With a desire to promote active involvement, the quality of the experience was improved for
participant and recipient. The measurable outcome has been a greater involvement by Vaughn Forest Church members and impact on those served (as described below). The church’s community outreach events have seen increased numerical impact in the community. The church hosts three events per year and have seen year on year increase in attendance. These three events are the Easter Party, Fall Festival and Christmas Party. In a two-year period, the Easter party increased from 800 attendees in 2015 to 2200 in attendance in 2017. The Fall Festival increased from its 2015 attendance of 1500 to 4300 attendees in 2017. The Christmas Party increased from 1500 in attendance in 2015 to 2800 in attendance in 2017. Further, the church has increased its local outreach for local impact and to spread the gospel in settings where need is great in the River Region. It is also strong enough now to be of support to other struggling churches in the region. Involvement in global mission trips have increased in participation from 15 people 2015 to 65 persons in 2017.

In conclusion, the application of the four strategies of Jesus to the context and ministries of Vaughn Forest Church has been successful. The church has seen significant growth and revitalization. The Vaughn Forest story has been highlighted in denominational outlets and in other publications.117

---

November 3, 2016

Jonathan Smith
IRB Exemption 2632.110316: Culture Based Discipling According to the Strategy of Jesus

Dear Jonathan Smith,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971