

J. T. English

**Deep Discipleship:**

**How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus**

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In 2020, the publishing company B&H Publishing published on the market a book, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*, by the author J. T. English. The author is a leading pastor of Storyline Fellowship in Arvada, Colorado, who received his Ph.D. in systematic theology from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As the title shows, the focus of this book is the topic of discipleship which the author covers in the seven chapters. The book starts with the Introduction which has a significant title: “Diagnosing the Discipleship Disease.” The author by using an example from his family life emphasizes the importance of the right diagnosis in the treatment of sickness because misdiagnosis and mistreatment could be fatal. This is then applied to the topic of discipleship. Namely, the author argues that “over the past several decades the Western church has noticed alarming symptoms of our discipleship disease.” The mistake would be to think that these symptoms are present because “the church has become increasingly irrelevant and requires too much from people who want to get involved.” On the contrary, “our ministry disease is not that the evangelical church is too deep, but that it is far too shallow.” Additionally, the author explains the problem:

People are leaving not because we have given them too much but because we have given them far too little. They are leaving the church because we have not given them any reason to stay. We are treating the symptoms of the wrong disease. Deep discipleship is about giving people more Bible, not less; more theology, not less; more spiritual disciplines, not less; more gospel, not less; more Christ, not less.... Put simply, we have settled for a shallow approach to discipleship, believing that breadth will lead to depth. We have adopted philosophies of ministry that focus on growing crowds instead of growing Christians. We have asked our pastors to be marketers, not ministers of the gospel. In the church, we focus on keeping people, but if they want to grow, they have to go outside the church. We think about how to keep people rather than how to form people.

The answer to this problem is that local churches implement a philosophy of ministry that will grow and mature deep and holistic disciples, and so in the next seven chapters, the author aims to do precisely that.

Chapter 1, “A God-Centered Vision for Discipleship,” addresses the question, “Why does deep discipleship matter?” and the answer to this question lies not only in what God does but more importantly in who God is. In other words, the glory of God should be the main motivating factor in everything that we do and the reason behind our ministries, programs, and practices but also our goal. The author reminds us that success in ministry is not found in building programs but in building disciples who love God with everything. That is why the author can claim that the sources of true discipleship are not better programs or preaching or this or that but God himself and observes that “it does not matter how good our ministry plans are if they are not reorienting people to set their eyes on the God of the Bible.”

In the rest of the chapter, the author discusses what he calls “two challenges to deep discipleship:” self-centered discipleship and spiritual apathy. The cure for both challenges is to see who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what is going to be required for them to follow him. Regarding the first challenge, the author claims that we are living in a cultural moment that centers all of reality on the autonomous self, and people are interested in spirituality that is focused on the self. The author argues that the church has both intentionally and unintentionally, tailored its discipleship strategies to accommodate, and even perpetuate, this cultural shift which is always present when churches and ministries begin to offer people what they *want* instead of what they *need*. However, discipleship is not about self-actualization or self-preservation or being true to yourself or a path to autonomous self-improvement that leads to a throne. On the contrary, discipleship is a path of self-denial that leads to a cross.

Regarding the second challenge, the author writes against discipleship or ministry programming that caters to spiritual apathy. Spiritual apathy is present when people in the church are bored with Jesus yet they are not bored with the church. In the author’s words: “It terrifies me that people may enjoy the sermon, participate in small group ministry, volunteer on one of our many teams, and be completely satisfied by their experience—yet be spiritually apathetic toward the person and work of Christ.” Accordingly, the author calls the church to address not only the problem of apostasy but apathy as well because both are equally dangerous for the church. Since the message of cultural Christianity is what is forming the majority of the people in our churches, in the rest of the chapter, the author compares and discusses “cultural Christianity” vs. “biblical Christianity.”

Chapter 2, “The Church: Where Whole Disciples Are Formed,” begins by author’s description of his first Bible study in the basement of the freshman dorm and the gospel presentation that he heard the next day which he describes as “the most unconvincing gospel presentation in the history of the world.” This experience showed him that “evangelistic methods don’t save people, God does,” and as he was bouncing between campus ministry and church trying to figure out what

it meant to be a Christian, he observed that many of his Christian friends who walked with God for years, seemed not to be all that interested in growing. A few years later he was in a similar situation where he wanted to grow but did not have a guide. In his words: “My discipleship felt aimless because my discipleship was churchless.” Additional problems occurred when he was told that to be equipped to do a ministry, he need to go to a seminary. The author demonstrated a lie that most American Christians believe: people need to leave the church to lead in the church because churches rely on outside organizations to make deep disciples.

The author strongly argues for the following: the church is called to make disciples and the church must stop delegating that responsibility to other organizations, such as seminaries because the church is the primary context for holistic discipleship. Such organizations can supplement discipleship but not be in charge of it. The author then asks this question: “Do you think your church could disciple its next lead pastor?” Every local church shares four distinctive qualities that uniquely set it apart as the primary context for discipleship: place, people, purpose, and presence. “Deep discipleship is grounded in a specific place (wherever it meets), with specific people (the church family), for a specific purpose (mission and Christlikeness), and empowered by God himself (presence).” In the rest of the chapter, the author discusses each of these qualities.

Chapter 3, “Space: Where Does Discipleship Happen in the Church?” is a continuation of the previous one. Since discipleship should happen in the church, the question is where in the local church? But for every church to consider this issue, the proper question is not “Where *can* we make disciples” but “Where *should* we make disciples?” The author invites churches that, first of all, take a discipleship inventory and define spaces in the following categories: nonessential and functional; essential and dysfunctional; nonessential and dysfunctional; essential and nonexistent.

Furthermore, some churches believe formation primarily happens in the context of learning environments and so such churches tend to be programmatic and event-driven. Other churches believe that holistic formation happens primarily in the context of community and these churches utilize environments such as small groups, home groups, or missional communities. The author argues against the approach either/or because both approaches are necessary. However, he strongly argues in this chapter for “spaces in the local church in which learning, in the context of community is the highest stated value,” because he would like to see “retrieval of Christian education in the local church.” Reason? People can be many years believers and involved in various ministries yet without knowing basic biblical and theological truths which classify them as biblically illiterate.

In the rest of the chapter, the author observes that having community does not automatically mean that we have discipleship. The community must be committed to learning the way of Jesus together. Also, he mourns over the fact that

in a situation where biblical literacy of believers is low many ministry models move away from the learning environment. Furthermore, because some recent research suggests that even though most committed Christians attend church on average two times per month, churches need to adopt a philosophy of ministry that would shape people seven days a week. Finally, the chapter ends with the discussion about “what does learning space look like” where the author argues that spaces need to be *transformative* and *active*. In all of that deep discipleship must be driven by collaborative spaces of community and learning where the emphasis first must be on the question “Who am I supposed to be?” before we can answer the question “What am I supposed to do?”

Chapter 4, “Scope: What Do Disciples Need?” begins with the author’s observation that many churches adopt a “Frankenstein philosophy of ministry.” In the author’s words: “A Frankenstein philosophy of ministry is a ministry creation that is the result of a lot of ministry experiments that don’t fit well together but end up being one big monster. For years, different things are added, taken away, and tweaked without considering the whole picture.” Philosophy of ministry should not be birthed by asking the question “What do disciples want?” Instead, the question should be: “What do disciples need?” Hence, leadership in churches needs to sit down and consider *why* they teach and train people toward a specific topic and how that topic relates to other training. The question of scope is of paramount importance because we may find out that we spend time, money, and energy on good but not great things. A Frankenstein philosophy of ministry can produce damage and hurt believers, so we must avoid it.

Instead of that, the author argues that every church must decide what the scope of discipleship is and then cut away everything else. That scope must take into consideration what virtues, characteristics, or learning outcomes the disciples in our church must have – in other words: competencies that disciples need to develop. To do that, the author suggests three areas that present a comprehensive picture of discipleship: Bible, beliefs, and spiritual habits. The Bible is needed because of the growing biblical illiteracy and the fact that we have an abundance of biblical resources and a famine of biblical knowledge. The author warns us that the goal of biblical literacy is faithful participation in God’s mission. Yet, by being illiterate, we run a risk of being doers without first being hearers and for that matter being inventors of our mission. As for the beliefs, the author discusses briefly the position and reputation of theology in the church and provides a reason why people in local churches should be educated in theology and church history. And the following sentence summarizes the author’s heart: “Doctrineless disciples cannot love God because they do not know him.” Since we are formed not only by what we know but also by what we do, the author also argues for the incorporation of formative habits – whether corporate or individual – into the discipleship of the local church.

Chapter 5, “Sequence: How Do Disciples Grow?” starts with the following sentence: “One of the most important things you can do is start raising the bar for your people.” The proper question for this aspect of discipleship is not “How do we maintain disciples in the local church?” but “How do we grow disciples in the local church?” The point is to create progressively challenging discipleship spaces in the local church so that believers might constantly grow. At the beginning of the chapter, the author discusses the paradoxical picture of Christian life which is an entire of grace but that we are also called to grow in that grace. Or as Willard notes: “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.” Hence, God uses his church to grow people, and for that matter, we should think strategically about how a discipleship sequence can help believers in the church to grow into maturity.

Because we have to think strategically about a disciple’s growth and we cannot be content with stagnant discipleship, so the author suggests that we organize discipleship on three levels: discipleship that is for everybody; discipleship that is for disciple-making disciples (from consumption to contribution); discipleship that is for those who will lead disciples. After discussing those three levels of discipleship, the chapter ends with the author’s observation that we should avoid philosophies of ministry that are focused on keeping disciples. Instead “if we implement a philosophy of ministry that values learning environments, in the context of community, and also allow disciples to take next steps through a sequence of learning, we will make maturing disciples of Christ.”

Chapter 6, “Send: Where Do Disciples Go?” discusses the false dichotomy between discipleship and mission. Namely, the author argues that Christian maturity and discipleship results and leads to mission. If that is not the case, we are not producing disciples of Christ. Hence, the proper question that churches need to ask is not “Where do *some* disciples go” but “Where do *all* disciples go?” For that matter “a central element of a church that is pursuing deep discipleship is intentionally commissioning disciples to participate in the mission of God.” The training is equally important as sending because, as the author notices, churches that focus on training without sending are mission-less and churches that focus on sending without training are purposeless. Deep and holistic discipleship is when all who are trained are sent and all who are sent are trained. But there is a warning that we need to hear: “Mission without formation is suicide for a church.” However, since disciples should intentionally be trained and sent to participate in the mission of God, in the rest of the chapter the author discusses a different context where disciples should be sent: the church, the home, their neighborhoods, the workplace, and the nations.

Chapter 7, “Strategy: Adopting a Holistic Approach to Discipleship,” is the final chapter in the book in which the author at the beginning summarizes the content of the book and questions that were posed in connection with every

chapter. After that the author observes that the final question that we need to ask is not “Can my church do this?” but “Why would my church *not* do this?” The fact is that everything that the author wrote about is pointless if our local church does not have the desire and the ability to execute this vision. Namely, the author is aware that readers might think that what he suggests in this book is only applicable for large churches that have many resources. But, pointing out that Jesus equally functioned in both large and small discipleship settings, the author furthermore discusses the question “How can your church implement this?”

This “How” is focused on principles that will help local churches to have a strategy to implement a philosophy of ministry that will create a culture of deep discipleship. Those principles are *structure, predictability, accountability, accessibility, community, and excellence* (SPAACE). In terms of structure, our approach to ministry needs to be structured and reliable because that will produce commitment. In terms of predictability, the author discusses the importance of rhythm. In terms of accountability, the author explains some ways how discipleship should be organized to make people accountable. In terms of accessibility, the author helps us to understand how to teach in an accessible way and how to make learning spaces accessible to people by removing obstacles. In terms of community, the author points out that discipleship happens in the community but also that if our ministry is built around structure and predictability, the community will naturally happen. Finally, in terms of excellence, the author urges us that our discipleship ministries should strive toward excellence.

In the epilogue, the author goes back to the beginning of the book where he discusses the problem or disease and mistreatment of it. He also mentions ministry strategies that require less of people instead of more. Even though we have settled for a shallow version of discipleship, Christ invites us to go deeper. The author desires that we would ask questions that are suggested in this book and that those questions will lead us to a better philosophy of ministry but also “to transformed lives that are growing deeper into fellowship with the Triune God.”

The book, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*, is simple yet deep, as the title states. It is structured well and chapters are logically connected and put in sequence, so when the reader reaches the end, it has a clear picture of what to do to implement the content of this book. When I read books that are written especially from the American authors in the back of my mind, I always pay attention to the fact that those authors are writing *from* their context and (primarily) *for* their context. In that case, things that are written are not always applicable elsewhere. However, with this book, I do not have this problem because, as the author says, implementing deep discipleship is primarily a matter of willingness and desire. Hence, our refusal to do that is not a matter of “we cannot” but “we do not want to.” And that is a frightening yet comforting thought.

The book is written for the general public but the main readers should be pastors and church leaders/workers because they are the ones who are in a position to make deep discipleship a reality in their churches. This book invites readers to observe the symptoms and deal with the disease, to observe the surface and go deep and transform churches into “houses of learning” that will produce disciples that will participate in God’s mission. And even though we might think that average believers are responsible for the spiritual condition of the churches, this book pushes us to look in another direction. Maybe people are spiritually immature, at a list in part, because churches are not doing discipleship or doing it in a shallow way.

Apostle Paul wrote the following words in 1 Corinthians 3:12-13: “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.” In this text Paul does not speak about how the individual Christian builds his or her life, but about what kind of materials church leaders use to build their churches. Paul’s point here is not just that we need to build others. Instead, we need to build others with materials that will endure the fire of that Day – gold, silver, precious stones. The book, *Deep Discipleship*, is written to help us to do precisely that.

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