

Dennis Allen

Disciple Dilemma

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The New Testament concept of “disciple” is not immediately accessible to most readers today. This has led some contemporary pastors, theologians, and lay leaders to attempt to bring discipleship closer to those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Dennis Allen, and his book *The Disciple Dilemma (TDD)*, is one of the latest examples. *TDD* is Allen’s passionate expression of how leaders can rediscover the New Testament call to discipleship and redirect the people they work with to follow Jesus’ call authentically. This three-part book published by Morgan James Faith, contains 310 pages, and includes an introduction and conclusion by the author.

As a six-time CEO in various sectors of the business world, Allen brings a lifetime of experience to the table. His goal is that this book would “result in a strategic change of direction” (p. xxvii). To that end, Allen explores and articulates the dilemma in the first part, points to the consequences the problem has caused in the second section, and finishes the book with strategies for how to move forward. This direct, to-the-point volume ultimately engages today’s reader in a conversation about how to make disciples the way Jesus did.

In the Introduction, the author equates the operating system (O/S) of computers with the Kingdom of God. Allen’s conviction is that the O/S has been hacked. This leads to Chapter 1 where the various symptoms of the dilemma are demonstrated showing a decline in attendance in Western churches and a loosening of some of the evangelical’s core convictions, among other things. He shows the contrast between the New Testament and modern understandings of discipleship, concluding that these symptoms demonstrate a deep cause for concern. The disciple dilemma is ultimately a question of whether leaders will leave ineffective traditions behind and lead the way toward needed changes and outcomes (p. 17).

In Chapter 2, Allen challenges the maxim “Salvation is free, lordship is optional” by looking at how this mindset arose in the 4th century during Constantine’s reign. Jesus’ call to give up everything (Luke 14:26-33) is recalled as the author reminds Christians that discipleship means commitment. He claims that an “optional lord-

ship” tradition has thrived from the time of Caesar to the modern day (p. 31). For Allen, this is one of the six traditions that have led to the dilemma in discipling.

Chapter 3 looks at the second tradition the author will challenge; “underdisciplined converts.” To Allen, mere salvation is not the end goal of the mission - discipling is. “When converts become the mission, the imperative is getting the next convert, not developing the existing disciples” (p. 35). Allen offers examples of Christian converts “de-converting” to other religions or belief systems and cites a lack of discipleship as the primary cause. Salvation, something to be celebrated, ought to be simply the *beginning* of a life surrendered to Christ rather than the end goal.

In Chapter 4, the author turns his attention from the “underdisciplined” Christian to the corrupt leader. The third of six traditions in the disciple dilemma is dysfunctional power. “Whether unintentional or malicious, power and influence unhinged from the mission will consume everything else” (p. 57). This is seen in Constantine’s rule over the Roman Empire when the church suddenly experienced unexpected legitimacy and influence. Disciples, rather than existing to advance political or social power, are called to develop other disciples. It’s here that Allen emphasizes Jesus’ example of humility and Paul’s encouragement to boast in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:31). Discipleship is all about living in authentic relationships rather than grasping for power.

In Chapter 5, the author discusses clericalism as the fourth tradition of the dilemma. Clericalism, as Allen defines it, is a “niche form of power and influence that sends a message to regular disciples that they are unworthy of doing things that the professional Christians do” (p. 86). This problem leads ultimately to disciples being isolated and, therefore, paralyzed. Jesus showed a different way, as did the church before Constantine (p. 89). Allen deals with the fifth unhealthy tradition in Chapter 6: size dynamics. Drawing on examples of mega-church pastors and others that react against this phenomenon, the author argues that an emphasis on size detracts from the biblical understanding of effective discipling. “If discipleship is to succeed, growth must be a symptom of a strategy, not the strategy itself” (p. 113).

In Chapter 7, the final tradition hindering discipleship is addressed, that is, letting distractions get in the way of the mission. Allen puts it this way: “When the main thing isn’t driving all the other things, the other things drive the main thing. Not a good thing” (p. 121). Throughout the chapter, various distractions that have derailed the church are presented. But Allen is clear: Making disciples is *the* primary mission. Therefore, among all the things leaders are to be concerned about, discipleship must remain the main thing.

These six traditions are taken up in the second part of the book which describes the dilemma’s effects. Chapter 8 looks at the consequences the traditions have on the individual disciple, while Chapter 9 examines how they affect the Christian

community. Allen summarizes the problem as it relates to both: “Disciples today live with the baggage and practices of long-embraced but dysfunctional traditions. These traditions are silencing, intimidating, and isolating disciples across the Christian landscape, taking the voices and lives out of the visible world” (p. 157).

The final part of the book suggests new paths forward. In Chapter 10, Allen presents three kinds of disciples: disciples who disciple others, students, and unbelieving disciples. Realizing that there are disciples who do not yet believe drives Allen’s understanding that being a disciple involves a dynamic process of learning and growing. This development is to take place within a community of other disciples. Ultimately, being a disciple is Christ-centered. “A disciple must instinctively grasp the fact that purpose, meaning, and destiny are possible only in Christ” (p. 192).

Mission and culture are outlined in chapters 11 and 12. To Allen, “discipleship is the mission” (p. 231) therefore the vision and culture must fall in line. Anything outside of this focus will only detract from making disciples. Understanding that this could be counter-cultural in many settings, Allen offers practical ways for leaders to get started.

Chapters 13 and 14 put the exclamation point on the entire book by strongly appealing to leaders to take charge, make the necessary changes, and get started. Allen steers his reader away from celebrity and power and onto the straight road of discipling the way Jesus modeled. This includes relational leadership. Leaders that fit the model Allen is promoting are “humble, gracious followers of Christ called to lead so the community’s disciples can flourish making disciples” (p. 251). Chapter 14 offers leader’s encouragement and advice on how to stay focused on the mission during times of crisis. Allen concludes on a personal note conveying his conviction that leaders should take responsibility for restoring a discipleship very different from modernity’s version (p. 265).

This book is for leaders who understand that something is amiss and want to be more effective in obeying Jesus’ commission to make disciples. To this end, Allen has made a compelling case. Because it is penned from the perspective of a CEO and businessman who writes from a certain evangelical background, readers within this culture will likely relate easily to his colorful anecdotes and conversational style. On the other hand, this may be a drawback for audiences (including this reviewer) outside of Allen’s context. Additionally, there is a certain one-size-fits-all presupposition underlying *TDD*. It appears as if Allen assumes that what he is suggesting can be implemented everywhere his readers are enthusiastic about following his lead. There very well may be legitimate cultural barriers Allen’s readers encounter that would require a more nuanced approach.

Yet, Allen’s focus is Christ-centered. He is at his best when he emphasizes Jesus’ way of discipling in contrast to many contemporary methods and tactics. “God’s

kingdom does not advance by co-opting political or social power. It does not advance demanding moral fealty by non-believers. It advances by disciples making and developing other disciples” (p. 65). Allen consistently points his readers to Christ and the way the Lord modeled discipleship. This is the greatest strength of the book.

His attention to the significance of relationships is also noteworthy. “The core of culture change is from leaders in relationship, helping people to comprehend and to want to come along on the journey of a body of believers aimed at biblical discipleship” (p. 246). As Allen notes in several passages, this important truth often gets overlooked in the busyness of many local church ministries. Leaders would do well to heed Allen’s advice here. *The Disciple Dilemma* additionally offers a strong emphasis on disciples living and working among unbelievers to be salt and light. The Christo-centric understanding of lordship and the primacy of mission recommends this book to leaders trying to discern what it means to make disciples.

Jeremy Bohall

Samuel L. Bray (Editor), Drew Nathaniel Keane (Editor)
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In recent years, perhaps decades, Christians from free churches have shown a renewed interest in liturgy. Several friends and acquaintances of mine have, purposefully or incidentally, found their spiritual home in the evangelical episcopal churches. Then, some understand the importance of prescribed and historically grounded liturgy but are prevented by their theological beliefs from abandoning their traditions solely for liturgy. It is important to note that every church has a liturgy, regardless of how elaborate or spontaneous it may be, and even spontaneous and “Spirit-led” worship in some churches amounts to liturgical expectations that should not be violated.

In this context, several decades ago, a Croatian document titled *Bogoslužni red baptističkih crkava* (Liturgical order of Baptist Churches) was created to foster a more liturgical style of worship. It was authored by Dr. Jasmin Milić, now the Bishop of the Protestantska reformirana kršćanska crkva in Croatia, and further refined for use in Baptist churches by pastor Giorgio Grlj (2022, email). Nevertheless, Baptist pastors mainly use it for special occasions such as ordinations, baptisms, weddings, or funerals.