



1

THE DISCIPLESHIP GAP

Where Have All the Disciples Gone?



If we are to devise a successful strategy of disciple making in our churches, we must first assess the gap between where we are and where we are called to go. Jesus promoted this approach when he challenged those who would follow him to first count the cost. “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether you have enough to complete it?” (Luke 14:28).



Max De Pree, who has popularized this biblical wisdom as top priority for leaders, writes, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.”¹ Why is it important to define reality? If we are trying to go somewhere, we first must know where we are in relationship to where we want to go. For example, when we are trying to find a particular store in a shopping mall, the first thing we do is locate the directory that displays the floor plan of all the shops. Our eyes immediately land on the red dot with an arrow pointing to it that says, “You are here!” Once we know where we are, we can locate our intended destination and plot the pathway to get there.

In the remainder of this chapter we will explore the deficit that





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

must be filled if making self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Christ is to become our new reality. In the next chapter the picture of current reality will be completed by looking at the causes of how we got to where we are now. Only as we have a clear description of the problem and its roots can we suggest the solution.

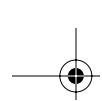
The analysis in this chapter will assist you to assess the gap between where you are and where you want to go. A sober analysis of our ministry is hard work and takes considerable courage. The doctor of ministry program that I directed requires that all incoming students take an assessment course to measure their personal and ministerial health. As we put this new program in place, a nagging doubt lurked in my mind. What if Christian leaders would rather avoid holding up a mirror before their lives and ministries and would prefer a distorted, more favorable false impression about themselves? On the whole we attracted increasing numbers of leaders who wanted to live in reality rather than in fantasy. As you read on, quietly pause and ask the Holy Spirit to allow you to receive the truth that will ultimately set you free.



THE STATE OF DISCIPLESHIP TODAY: YOU ARE HERE!

If I were to choose one word to summarize the state of discipleship today, that word would be *superficial*. There appears to be a general lack of comprehension among many who claim Jesus as Savior as to the implications of following him as Lord. The Joint Statement on Discipleship at the Eastbourne Consultation began with an acknowledgment of need: “As we face the new millennium, we acknowledge that the state of the Church is marked by growth without depth. Our zeal to go wider has not been matched by a commitment to go deeper.”² John Stott has added his voice on this matter: “For many years, 25 or more, the church-growth school has been dominant. I rejoice in the statistics, but we must say it is growth without depth. I believe it was Chuck Colson who said the church is 3,000 miles wide and an inch deep. Many are babes in Christ.”³





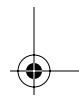
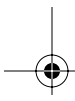
The Discipleship Gap

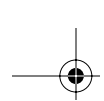
This superficiality comes into startling focus when we observe the incongruity between the numbers of people who profess faith in Jesus Christ and the lack of impact on the moral and spiritual climate of our times. During the decade of the 1990s, Christian pollster George Barna tracked the numbers of those who identified themselves as born-again Christians.⁴ The percentages of adults during the decade of the 1990s who fit this description ranged from a low of 35 percent to a high of 43 percent.⁵ Barna's counterpart in the wider culture, George Gallup, asked whether people would describe themselves as "born again or evangelical." Over the same period an astonishing range of 35 to 49 percent so identified themselves.⁶ These numbers scream for an explanation. How can Christian leaders moan over the moral decline of our society while so many people have indicated a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ? If these multiple millions of Jesus' namers were Jesus' followers, we would not be wagging our fingers in shame at a civilization that has turned away from God.

Cal Thomas, a Christian syndicated columnist and social commentator, calls Christians to look at the quality of our discipleship instead of directing our indignation at the moral decay. He writes, "The problem in our culture . . . isn't the abortionists. It isn't the pornographers or drug dealers or criminals. It is the undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient, and Biblically ignorant Church of Jesus Christ."⁷

How deep is the discipleship deficit that we face? What are the symptoms of superficiality that we witness in the church? We are able to gauge the discipleship deficit when we compare the biblical standards of discipleship with the reality of their achievement in our churches and ministries. What is the gap we observe between the biblical standard and the reality in our Christian communities?

Seven marks of discipleship will be described in the rest of this chapter. At the end of each section you will have an opportunity to





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

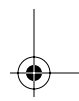
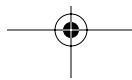
identify the gap between the biblical standard and the reality of your ministry.

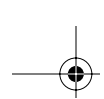
THE BIBLICAL STANDARD AND THE CURRENT REALITY

1. Proactive ministers. The Scriptures picture the church as full of proactive ministers; the reality is that a majority of church members are passive recipients.

The New Testament picture of the church is an every-member ministry. The “priesthood of all believers” is not just a Reformation watchword but also a radical biblical ideal. Writing to scattered, persecuted Christians, Peter refers to the church in aggregate when he writes, “You [plural] are . . . a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Every believer comes to God via Christ as mediator, and every believer is enabled to act as a priest on behalf of fellow members of the body of Christ. Ministry that is biblically envisioned calls up images not of the paid priest who is set apart from and above the rest of the body of believers but of ordinary saints. The apostle Paul has the everyday Christian in mind when he writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Playing off the image of the church as the body of Christ, Paul is saying that all believers have been given ministry gifts by the Holy Spirit and therefore each believer is equivalent to a body part that contributes to the health of the whole. The New Testament describes a full employment plan that dignifies and gives all believers value based on the contribution their gifts make in building up and extending the church.

Yet when we turn from the biblical standard of the first-century church to the reality of the church today, we see a relatively small percentage of people who move beyond Sunday worship into the life and ministry of a congregation or who experience ministry as a way of life. The 80/20 rule seems impossible to transcend. If we chart giving patterns, for example, 20 percent of a congregation gives 80 percent of the income. If we study the ministry profile of





The Discipleship Gap

volunteers, we find that a fairly steady 20 percent serve the 80 percent who are consumers of their efforts.

Conversely, this means a high percentage of spectators are filling the pews. As a pastor, I was consciously aware that people arrived at worship with a reviewers' mentality. Worshipers see it as the responsibility of those on stage to provide an engaging, meaningful and entertaining show, while it is the worshipers' job to give an instant review of the worship service as they pass through the receiving line after worship. Doesn't it seem odd for people to make evaluative comments like "Good sermon, Pastor," or "I enjoyed the service this morning" about the worship of the living God? On many a Sunday after concluding the morning message, when I glanced in the direction of the choir I expected to see them raise cards from their laps rating the sermon—9.9, 9.4, and so on.

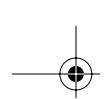
If ministry is largely being stewards of our spiritual gifts, then the task ahead is daunting. The good news is that Barna found that 85 percent of believers had heard of spiritual gifts. Of those 85 percent, however, half either were ignorant of the gifts they had or believed that God had bypassed them in the distribution process. One quarter of the people who thought they knew their spiritual gifts named gifts that had no correlation with a biblical profile. People said things like, "I have the gift of making cherry pies" or "I have the gift of gab." Only one quarter of the people who knew their spiritual gifts identified gifts that had a biblical basis.⁸



Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being passive recipients and 5 being proactive ministers.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Passive recipients . . . Proactive ministers		

2. *A disciplined way of life.* The Scriptures picture followers of





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

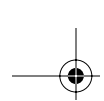
Jesus as engaged in a disciplined way of life; the reality is that a small percentage of believers invests in spiritual growth practices.

Great and accomplished athletes perform effortlessly. What we don't see are the hours of repetitive practice that make Tiger Woods's golf swing look so smooth or Michael Jordan's last-second buzzer beater look routine. No matter how natural one's talent, the great athletes are great because they practice at a greater level than everyone else.

In the New Testament one of the consistent images for the Christian life is the discipline of an athlete. Comparing the Christian life with a race, Paul writes, "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one" (1 Corinthians 9:25). In making this comparison, Paul raises the bar. If athletes will put themselves through a rigorous regimen to get a "perishable wreath," how much more should Christians discipline themselves, because our goal is "an imperishable one"! The writer to the Hebrews urges believers to move beyond being milk-drinking infants to adult believers who can take in solid food. Using the image of the gymnasium and athletic exertion, he writes, "But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14).⁹ One is left with an obvious impression that leading the Christian life will require spiritual discipline. No accomplishment comes without practice and discipline.

Yet when we turn from the scriptural picture to today's church, we observe another version of the 80/20 rule. Studies have shown that only one out of six adults who attend Christian worship services is involved in a group or relational process designed to help them grow spiritually. Of the 17 percent involved in a corporate commitment, the means of choice by far is a small group (69 percent) that meets to study the Bible and consider the application of spiritual realities to life. Less common means of discipleship, in order of involvement, are an adult Sunday school class (20 percent),





The Discipleship Gap

one-to-one mentoring (14 percent), a special faith-based class (11 percent) and online training or interaction geared to discipleship (3 percent).¹⁰ Barna comments pointedly on his research, “In a society as fast-moving and complex as ours, people have to make choices every minute of the day. Unless people have a regular and focused exposure to the foundations of their faith, the chances of Christians consistently making choices to reflect biblical principles are minimal.”¹¹

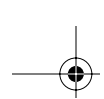
When it comes to the personal or individual disciplines of the faith that would indicate an ordering of a person’s life in relationship to Christ, the signs are no more hopeful. According to Barna, fewer than one in five born-again adults have any specific, measurable goals related to their spiritual development. In Barna’s nationwide survey, interviews were conducted with hundreds of people, including pastors and church leaders, who regularly attended church services and programs. Barna concludes, “Not one of the adults we interviewed said that their goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ or to make disciples of the entire world—or even their entire block.”¹² When this group was asked what they wanted to accomplish in life, eight out of ten believers found success in family, career development and financial achievement. Dallas Willard concludes, “The fact is that there is now lacking a serious and expectant intention to bring Jesus’ people into obedience and abundance through training.”¹³



Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being spiritually undisciplined and 5 being spiritually disciplined.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Spiritually undisciplined . . . Spiritually disciplined		

3. Discipleship affects all of life. The Scriptures picture disciple-





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

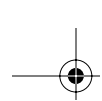
ship as affecting all spheres of life; the reality is that many believers have relegated faith to the personal, private realm.

The dominant theme of Jesus' public ministry was the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God. The future, long-awaited kingdom, where the rule and reign of God would be actualized on earth, had broken into this present darkness in the person of the King, Jesus Christ. The promise is that those who "repent, and believe" the gospel (Mark 1:15) are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). A new authority or regime is established in the hearts of Jesus' followers. That authority affects all that we are in all that we do in all spheres of life. The motif of the kingdom means that there is not a scintilla of life that does not come under the authority of Jesus Christ. Fundamentally we are kingdom people, which means that Jesus is Lord in our hearts, homes and workplaces; our attitudes, thoughts and desires; our relationships and moral decisions; our political convictions and social conscience. In every area of our interior life, personal relationships or social involvement, we seek to know and live the mind and will of God.

Yet the reality is that we suffer today from the same bifurcated existence that Martin Luther addressed almost five hundred years ago with Reformation force. In writing his *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, Luther said that the first wall of Romanism was a false distinction between what he called the "spiritual estate" and "temporal estate."¹⁴ In Luther's day the spiritual estate was the realm of the church and its holy orders, which took precedence over and elevated itself above the temporal estate, which was the realm of government and the common life. Luther attempted to break down the wall between the sacred and secular, declaring that in kingdom terms everything is sacred. The dividing line is not between sacred and secular but between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

We still suffer under the false notion that the religious realm lies





The Discipleship Gap

in the sacred, private sphere. The sacred is associated with the church, the family and the interior commitments of individuals. Religion is a private affair that has little influence on the public arenas of life—the workplace, politics and other major institutions of society such as economics, education and the media. A newly converted vice president at NBC was asked how his new faith would affect the moral standards of programming at NBC. Buying in to the sacred-secular bifurcation, he said, “All it does is give me peace of mind in my personal life. But whether it will affect my programming, it doesn’t. It just makes me think clearer, but that just means I will probably think more commercially than I did before.”¹⁵

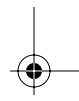
There is a disconnect for many Christians when it comes to seeing ourselves as representatives of the kingdom of God in what we spend most of our time doing—our jobs. Many fellow believers unconsciously take off their Christian hat and put on their secular hat when they walk through the doorway of the workplace. It is assumed that we play by a different set of rules when it comes to our secular employment versus the way we live in the sacred realm. How out of step this is with Jesus’ message of the kingdom!

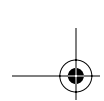


Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being private faith and 5 being holistic discipleship.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Private faith . . . Holistic discipleship		

4. A countercultural force. The Scriptures picture the Christian community as a countercultural force; the reality is that we see isolated individuals whose lifestyle and values are not much different from those of the unchurched.

Stott describes the church of the Lord’s intention as a commu-



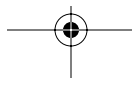


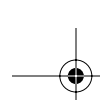
TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

nity of “radical non-conformity.” This phrase is a helpful summary of some of the biblical metaphors for the church. The images of alien, exile and sojourner capture the relationship of believers to this present world (1 Peter 2:11). This sentiment is expressed in the words of the old hymn, “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through.” The church in the biblical scheme is a body whose collective lifestyle forms a countercultural alternative to the values of the dominant society.

The apostle Peter gave us a word picture for this new reality when he addressed the church dispersed across the landscape of the Greco-Roman world. Though these believers in Jesus did not have a land to call their own, he could still say to them, “You are . . . a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). By using this image Peter was saying, “You are a people who cut across all geopolitical boundaries, because you are a church without borders.” To be holy is to be a called-out people, meaning separate or different. One of the key distinguishing features of this new kingdom people is their lifestyle of compassionate and costly service. Echoing Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16), Peter says, “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:12). Those hostile to the church may not affirm what you believe, but they can’t argue against the way you live.

If that was true then, what is it that people see today when they look at the church? Many observers have concluded that the church, far from being countercultural, does not look much different from the unchurched. After looking at a number of categories of lifestyle and values, Barna concluded, “The fact that the proportion of Christians who affirm these values is equivalent to the proportion of non-Christians who hold similar views indicates how meaningless Christianity has been in the lives of millions of professed believers.”¹⁶ Regarding materialism and measuring success,





The Discipleship Gap

half the Christian public never has enough money to buy what they need or want. One in four Christians thinks the more you have, the more successful you are.

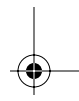
The church is not immune to the diseases of individualism and consumerism dominant in American society. Sociologist Robert Bellah searched for the core characteristic that defines the American character. In his landmark study *Habits of the Heart* Bellah says that what makes Americans distinct comes down to one thing, a view of freedom. Yet when we look more closely, we see a one-sided view of freedom. Americans want freedom *from* rather than freedom *for*, an attitude of “I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it. No one better tell me otherwise.” Bellah concludes that this quality is not the stuff on which to build enduring relationships (such as marriage) or deep community. To the extent that the church is reduced to an aggregate of individuals who shop like consumers to meet their needs, we do not have the basis for community in any biblical sense. How can we possibly build countercultural communities out of such porous material?

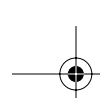


Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being blending in and 5 being countercultural force.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Blending in . . . Countercultural force		

5. An essential, chosen organism. The Scriptures picture the church as an essential, chosen organism in whom Christ dwells; the reality is that people view the church as an optional institution, unnecessary for discipleship.

The church of Jesus Christ is nothing less than his corporate replacement on earth. Jesus continues his incarnation by dwelling in his people. The late Ray Stedman succinctly described Christ’s re-





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

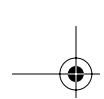
lationship to the church: “The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church.”¹⁷ The apostle Paul’s favorite and most fundamental image for the church is that of the body of Christ. When Paul uses this phrase, it is far more than a nice word picture or metaphor. He is not saying that the church is *like* the body of Christ but that it literally *is* the body of Christ. This is the place where Christ dwells.

The implication that follows is that the church is not an optional afterthought for those who name Christ as their Lord. The church is central to God’s plan of salvation. God saves people into a new community, which is the vanguard of a new humanity. To be called to Christ is to throw in one’s lot with his people. Many people today like to say, “Jesus, yes; church, no.” To do so is a fundamental misunderstanding of the place that the church has in God’s grand scheme of salvation. To be a follower of Christ is to understand that there is no such thing as solo discipleship.

Yet this optional attitude toward the church surfaces in our individualistic, take-our-own-counsel culture. How does this optional attitude express itself?

One such expression is that being integrally involved in the church is not a necessity for Christian living. My wife and I visited a well-known Southern California church the Sunday following Easter. The message was directed toward the twenty-one hundred people who had indicated they made a decision to receive Christ during the Easter services. The teacher of the morning asked the worshippers, “Is it necessary to go to church or be a part of the church to be a Christian?” His answer? “No, it is not necessary.” I had to do everything I could not to bolt from my seat and shout, “Yes, it is absolutely necessary to be a part of the church if you are a Christian!” But that is not the prevailing wisdom, apparently even from those who should know better.





The Discipleship Gap

Christian leaders live with the tension of serving a community of people with a tenuous commitment. How do you call people to the discipline of discipleship when they can easily walk on you? Unless there is a covenantal understanding of a believer's relationship with a community, how can people be formed into Christlike disciples?

Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being church is optional and 5 being church is essential.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Church is optional . . . Church is essential		



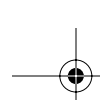
6. Biblically informed people. The Scriptures picture believers as biblically informed people whose lives are founded on revealed truth; the reality is that most believers are biblically ignorant people whose lives are a syncretistic compromise.



The Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is the trustworthy depository of God's self-revelation to humanity. This is the historic Christian confession about the uniqueness of the Bible. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, while the Bible is the God-breathed written Word that is the reliable witness to his actions in history. Although truth can be found beyond Scripture, the test of what is true is anchored in the written Word of God. This belief about the book we call the Bible has made it the source of our public teaching, the object of disciplined devotional reading and the truth around which small groups gather. The twin disciplines of prayer and Bible reading have been promoted as the activities that should dominate a believer's daily devotional practice.

Yet in spite of what we affirm about the uniqueness of this book, Christians in general are ignorant of its content and hold convictions that are contrary to its clear and central teaching. About the





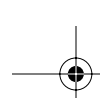
TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

disjunction between the attitude that people have about the Bible and their knowledge of it, Gallup has written, “Americans revere the Bible—but, by and large, they don’t read it.”¹⁸ According to Gallup, 65 percent of the adult population agree that the Bible “answers all or most of the basic questions of life.”¹⁹ Barna’s surveys found that 60 percent of all American adults and 85 percent who described themselves as born again would affirm the statement “The Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches.” In spite of these affirmations there is an appalling ignorance of the book we put on a pedestal. For example, 53 percent of the adults in Barna’s survey believed that the saying “God helps those who help themselves” is a biblical truth.

But even more disturbing than not knowing certain factual data is holding basic beliefs that are contrary to biblical affirmation. Of all Americans, 61 percent believed that the Holy Spirit is not a living entity but a symbol of God’s presence and power, whereas 58 percent believed the devil or Satan is not a living being but only a symbol of evil. Perhaps the most disturbing finding was that four out ten people actively involved in Christian discipleship relationships believed that there is no such thing as absolute truth.²⁰

Only a generation ago, two Christian prophets, Francis Schaeffer and Elton Trueblood, predicted that we were one generation away from losing the memory of Christianity in our culture. They both referred to America as a “cut-flower” society. By that they meant that our culture has been severed from its Judeo-Christian roots and that we are living on the memory of faith. They predicted that it would take just one more generation for this memory to fade. We are that generation. Preachers and teachers of the Word can no longer assume that mention of the biblical figures like David and Goliath will instantly draw the story to people’s memories. No assumptions can be made about what people know or the beliefs they hold.





The Discipleship Gap

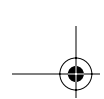
Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being biblically illiterate and 5 being biblically informed.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Biblically illiterate . . . Biblically informed		

7. People who share their faith. The Scriptures picture all believers as those who share the story of their faith in Christ with others; the reality is we are an intimidated people who shrink from personal witness.

We are storytellers. The Bible spins a love story of God’s pursuit of wayward humanity. Those who have been captured by Jesus Christ have a story to tell of how God chased us down and embraced us in his loving arms. In so doing, the Lord has written us as characters into his grand redemptive drama. We each have an assigned part to play on the stage of history, which is the realm in which God writes his story. It is this story that makes sense of why we are here. As unique as each of us is, there is a common story line written into the script for each of our lives. “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus says (Acts 1:8). We each have our story and *the* story to tell, for in the sharing of our story and *the* story, others come to find that they too have been written into this redemptive drama. Paul could not be clearer about the privilege that is ours when he wrote that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). God has entrusted to us the story of the visited planet, and telling it is the means that he uses to melt human hearts.

How are we doing in telling the story? On the surface the picture appears to be quite positive, but it gets cloudier upon closer examination. Of those who identified themselves as born again, 55 percent said that they had shared their faith in Christ with someone in the last year with the hope of seeing that person become a follower





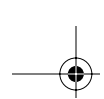
TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

of Christ.²¹ Yet when they were asked if they have intentionally built a relationship with someone with the hope of being able to lead the person to Christ, only one in ten could affirm that they had. “Fewer than one in five said that they knew a non-believer well enough that they could share their faith with an individual in a context of trust and credibility.”²² Another way this need has been dramatized is that it takes 100 members of a congregation to win 1.67 people to Christ in a given year. This indicates that a small percentage of people are active in a personal witness to the gospel.

In my experience as a pastor, it appears that a small percentage of a congregation have the confidence and motivation to share their gospel story with others. A major contributor to this inhibition is the intimidation that comes from living in a culture that shuns absolute truth. The only truth that is recognized is personal truth. Each person has his or her individual truth, while no one else’s truth should be imposed upon another. This has the effect of putting all truth claims on an equal plane. Since the god of this age is maximum choice, any belief that lays claim to be *the* truth will be met with indignation. On many occasions I have braced myself for the pushback, “You mean to tell me if I don’t accept Christ I am going to hell?” Each time I swallowed hard and somewhat reluctantly said, “Jesus is the one in whom God has revealed himself and through him made provision for us to be made right with him.” It seems so intolerant in an age where tolerance is equated with grace.

In this atmosphere of intimidation, we must ask ourselves what we have to offer. Do we truly believe that we have something that is so vital and personally life giving that we have something to give away? Another way to look at this might be, do we want someone else to have the same fulfilling relationship with God that we do? Bill Hybels, senior pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, says that seekers look at our lives and ask themselves, “If I become a Christian, am I trading up or trading down?”²³ So the question





The Discipleship Gap

becomes, is our experience of the love and joy of Jesus worth transmitting to others? For many, it is not.

Rate your ministry on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being shrinking from personal witness and 5 being sharing our faith.		
DISCIPLESHIP SYMPTOM	RATING	NOTES
Shrinking from personal witness . . . Sharing our faith		

THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Is this an accurate picture of the state of discipleship today? Overly dire? Does this picture accord with your reality? If this portrait of the gap between the biblical standard and the current state of discipleship is close to being accurate, then there is enormous work to be done if the gap is to be closed.

What is our intended destination? Joel Barker helps us to focus our goal with what he calls the paradigm shift question: “What is impossible to do in your business [read church or ministry], but if it could be done, would fundamentally change it?”²⁴ The following is my vote for the paradigm shift question that expresses the impossible possibility: How can we grow self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ?

This strategic question is a way of asking how we might fulfill what Jesus said is the mission of his church. Jesus saved every church considerable time and effort when he wrote the mission statement that gives us our marching orders: “Go therefore and make disciples [of me] of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). What is a disciple of Jesus but one who is self-initiating, reproducing and fully devoted to him? What seems unattainable is that there would be churches filled with disciples who do not have to be pushed, motivated and cajoled.

My goal in this chapter has been to bring into stark focus the im-





TRANSFORMING DISCIPLESHIP

possible possibility. It is to this impossible possibility that leaders must speak. John Kotter in *Leading Change* says that the primary reason why change does not occur is that there is no sense of urgency.²⁵ Leadership is about instilling urgency, which comes about by defining reality and calling God's people to the possibilities and dreams of what God intended us to be.

Only as we soberly assess the way things are can we have any hope of getting to the way things were designed to be. We have hope because Jesus as the Lord of the church seeks for his bride to be without spot and blemish, for through his church his life will be manifest. Barna has written, "Christianity would be incredibly influential in our culture if Christians consistently lived their faith. Most non-Christians don't read the Bible, so they judge Christianity by the lives of the Christians they see. The problem is that millions of Christians don't live like Christians—and that's partially because they don't know what they believe and therefore cannot apply appropriate scriptural values to their lives."²⁶

How have we gotten to this state of discipleship? It is one thing to describe where we are. It is another to identify the root causes of the problem. In the next chapter, we will complete our portrait of reality by identifying the contributing factors that have diverted us from making self-initiating, reproducing, fully devoted followers of Jesus as the central mission of the church. When we know and face the causes of our low level of discipleship, then we can begin to address them.

