



**E. K. Strawser**

FOREWORD BY JR WOODWARD

**CENTERING  
DISCIPLESHIP**

A PATHWAY FOR MULTIPLYING  
SPECTATORS INTO MATURE DISCIPLES



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# MAKING DISCIPLESHIP CENTRAL

*Example is not the main thing. It is the only thing.*

**ALBERT SCHWEITZER**

*The Lord is with those whose hearts are committed to him.*

**2 CHRONICLES 16:9 GW**

I know what it's like. If you're from Philly, whether you're Black or White, Hispanic or Asian, blue-collar or white-collar, Muslim or Jew, during football season, you don green Eagles apparel whether or not you even know what football is. You practice your "fly eagle fly" dance, get your tailgating game on, and ready yourself for an intense season of Sunday night football viewing. Every. Sunday. Night.

I also happen to be a doctor, and on one particular Sunday night, I had an ER shift. Everyone who has been in the emergency room knows the chaos that exists in that high-volume, high-risk, high-intensity environment. Quick triaging and transporting of patients to makeshift hospital beds, assessing life-and-death situations at every turn, dealing with screaming babies with high fevers, assessing gunshot wounds and abdominal lacerations, managing acute heart attacks and stroke cases, and cleaning up buckets of vomiting. When you go into your ER shift, you know to expect categorized chaos. But if you live in Philadelphia, and you're wearing your green Eagles apparel, and it's a Sunday night when

your favorite football team is playing, even in the emergency room it's dead silent.

It was one of those Sunday nights for me. In a room with an occupancy of fifty patients, we had three people on gurneys. There was such a lull that we pulled all the individual curtains back, turned all the TVs to face the central nursing station, and all of us—doctors, nurses, janitors, and medical technicians—watched the Eagles game from wherever we were.

Like clockwork, as soon as that three-hour game was over, it was like someone pushed a button. Anyone experiencing medical discomfort in their body suddenly decided to proceed to the nearest emergency room. The moment the game was over, patients started pouring in. It was a wonder that cardiac arrests could arrest themselves until a Sunday night Eagles game was over.

In a city like that, being a fan was not an option—it was a mandate. But over the years I began to be able to tell the fans from the followers. The bandwagoners versus the diehards. Those who paid attention only when the Eagles had a chance at the Super Bowl and those who supported the team even when they probably wouldn't make the playoffs. Mere fans versus true followers. Fans just join in the fun; followers support, rally, and carry their team through the thickest of seasons.

This isn't just true in sports either. A superficiality of fanhood is emerging throughout contemporary culture via social media. Communications professor Brandi Watkins notes that, among social media influencers (SMIs), “the lengths someone will go to in order to maintain their status as an influencer are astonishing, as are the many pitfalls that are associated with the pressures of being an SMI.”<sup>1</sup> The social media culture has become a race to see who has the most followers and to try desperately to appease them, with threat of being “unfollowed” ever present. Influencers know that followers and fans are one and the same. There is less and less distinguishing mere fans from true followers.

## MERE FANS VERSUS TRUE FOLLOWERS

Second Chronicles 14–16 highlights the reign of Judah's king Asa, whose “heart was fully committed to the LORD all his life” (2 Chron 15:17). Yet

after gaining safety for Judah against surrounding nations by relying on God, in the thirty-sixth year of his reign Asa makes an unwise treaty with the king of Aram, using silver and gold from the Lord's temple to maintain his own security at the expense of Israel's. Hanani the seer goes to the king and says:

Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the LORD, he delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war. (2 Chron 16:8-9)

God is not looking for mere fans; he's searching for true followers, those whose hearts are fully committed to him. He's not looking for band-wagoners who cheer him on in easier seasons, nor is he concerned with our fair-weather decisions on following or unfollowing him. God is looking for true followers who rely on him, follow him, rest in him, and are renewed by him. Being a true follower means being a disciple, and discipleship is important to God. In all four of the Gospel accounts, from the very beginning Jesus calls ordinary people to follow him.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, "following" and "discipleship" are synonymous because they're translated from the same Greek word, *mathētēs*. As such, Matthew 16:24 can be translated several ways:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (NIV)

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (ESV)

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. (NLT)

The word *mathētēs* refers to a learner, apprentice, pupil, adherent, or follower.<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul and other New Testament writers further define being a follower and disciple of Jesus by using the word *mimētēs*,<sup>4</sup> which translates as "imitating" and is where the English word "mimic" comes from. Thus 1 Corinthians 11:1 can be translated as:

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (NIV)

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (NRSV)

Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. (KJV)

Therefore, when we look at the entirety of the New Testament and its references to being a follower and a disciple, it's safe to conclude that to the first-century Christians, being a follower of Jesus was about imitating Jesus.

Fans will often say, “I think I really like you, and I like what you stand for in certain areas, and I think I can identify with this as long as we're in a good season.” But Jesus isn't looking for fans; he's searching for followers—people who will follow him no matter what, whose hearts are fully committed to him. People who say, “No matter the circumstance, whatever the season, I'm with you, Jesus. Wherever you want to go, whatever you want to do, I am with you no matter what. I'm going to follow you in all respects and I identify with and choose you above all other things.” Jesus also isn't looking for just one person; he's searching to and fro for a community of people whose hearts are for one another because their hearts are fully committed to him. People who move into neighborhoods and create networks of culture and community around them to follow Jesus into all the nooks and crannies where the Holy Spirit is already at work (Jn 13:35).

Discipleship—being a true follower of God and imitating Jesus—is what God himself is using to transform and redeem the whole world. A sending (missional) and trinitarian (communal) God is transforming and redeeming the world through true followers who imitate him in both his missional and communal nature. Discipleship is central to this.

Are you a disciple of Jesus? Is your community a community of disciples of Jesus?

## THE MAIN THING

In Matthew 28, Jesus gives a final address to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I



have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Mt 28:18-20)

As with most subtitled movies, we don't really understand the heart of what's going on unless we go back to the original language. A common misnomer about this passage is that Jesus is giving us a list of suggested tasks; we pick a couple and we're good to go. But Jesus isn't giving us options. This is not a top ten list of recommendations for living a good life. In the original Greek, Jesus is commanding his disciples to do just one thing: make disciples.

Murray Harris notes in *Navigating Tough Texts* that the word translated "go" is often misunderstood as a command, when in actuality it's a participle—"going"—that highlights the main command.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Jesus is saying to his followers, "I have all the power and authority you'll ever need. In light of that, I'm assuming you'll go out. As you go out, there's one main thing I want you to focus on: make disciples. Doing this one thing brings others into a journey of becoming committed to the communal and sending God. And don't forget, I am with you wherever you go, even to the very end."

If discipleship is the main thing and it means imitating Jesus, then we as leaders ought to consider the following questions:

- Am I a disciple of Jesus? How do I know I'm a disciple of Jesus?
- Do I make disciples? Have I ever discipled someone else?

If Jesus says being a disciple and making disciples is the main thing, then that's the main thing for us. But what in the world does this look like? How do we know for certain that this is happening in our own life? What is present in our life that makes us say, "I am a disciple"? Or, "That girl is a disciple for sure!"

Most people answer this question in the theoretical: "A disciple is someone who lives a surrendered life." Or, "A disciple is someone who's in love with Jesus." While these are good things to be, they aren't tangible enough to properly answer the question. Which leaves us at the same place we started. How do we know that a person is living a surrendered life? How do people actually show that they're in love with Jesus?

We as leaders understand the sentiment behind being disciples and the good intentions that go along with it, but we don't always know exactly what we're looking for or need to focus on. And if I don't know how to tangibly identify a disciple, then realistically, I don't know how to go about making one. Speaking from my own experience, I knew how to escort people into Christian culture. I knew how to help people come to church, join a small group, and get involved in serving the church. Was this how to make a *disciple*? I could teach people to learn how to read the Bible and pray, but was this how to *make* a disciple? Since I participated in these activities myself, did this make *me* a disciple of Jesus?

Something didn't sit right with me; there had to be more. And I knew there had to be more because the people I read about who were called Jesus' disciples were not living the kind of life I saw the people who called themselves disciples living in the church today. Jesus said he came so we would have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10), but when I looked around, it seemed like that abundant life was alluded to—like a dream or wishful thinking—but never really lived out.

## DISCIPLESHIP AS PERIPHERAL

Somehow along the way, discipleship became synonymous with assimilation into church culture. Making disciples came to mean helping people participate in Christian activities. While being a disciple of Jesus involves partnering with the local church, it is by no means the full picture. If we honestly and humbly examine ourselves and our leadership, we must admit to living in self-deception: making disciples has become the same thing as making a worship service gathering or, at its extreme, a megachurch.

Sociologists Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk state, “The megachurches movement is one of the leading indicators of how American Christians exercise their faith these days. . . . Megachurch services feature a come-as-you-are atmosphere, rock music and a multisensory mélange of visuals and other elements to stimulate the senses, as well as small group participation and a shared focus on the message from a charismatic pastor.”<sup>6</sup> Practical metrics of church attendance and financial prosperity are the two

fruit we look for in evaluating whether we've made disciples. We have perpetuated a culture of spectators and nonparticipants that bears no fruit. We at best cultivate a weekly variety show that highlights a TED-like talk bookended by a local unpaid band, often paying for either smoke machines or organ maintenance. This ritual actually pushes discipleship more and more into the margins while tethering people more firmly to consumerism. Our stage productions depend financially and culturally on spectatorship.

I am not satisfied with this. I don't think you're satisfied with this either. I don't think you're satisfied with the people we lead and love investing their efforts in a weekly stage production rather than the needs of their neighborhoods and communities. I don't think you're satisfied with our congregants being "discipled" by sermons or musical experiences instead of being intentionally equipped. I want God's people to get up out of the seats and fully participate in the abundant life Jesus offers all of us. I want them to experience the fruit that all of us are called to bear. I want them to bear that fruit for the sake of their neighbors, coworkers, families, and friends.

## DISCIPLESHIP AS CENTRAL

A custom in our household is that when you become a teenager, you trek the steep terrain to conquer the first of three peaks of Mount Olomana, the iconic giant overshadowing the windward side of Oahu. Every year after that, you traverse that mountain peak by peak until you're able to reach the ultimate summit. Our sixteen- and fifteen-year-old have summited this mountain with my husband using all the bouldering techniques and ropes required; our youngest will begin her trek next year. Steve and I initiated this tradition for our children not because it has anything to do with climbing but because it has everything to do with discipleship.

Climbing Mount Olomana is intended for our children to experience the journey firsthand, recognizing its importance, hardship, and beauty and being guided compassionately and patiently by someone who's just a little further ahead. By revisiting the same mountain year in and year out, they notice their own growth and progress, discovering that the ropes

segment they once found terrifying is now less so, the grip that took forever to learn is now a breeze, and the climb that once produced uncertainty and hesitation now yields pleasure and expectation. Climbing Mount Olomana each year is akin to a discipleship pathway for our teenage children, and in our family we keep discipleship central. More than anything else, we strive to equip our children to leave our home for the adventure that awaits them as they mature and flourish in the way of Jesus for the sake of those around them.

Likewise, our local church community keeps discipleship central by orienting our life around it. Every owner (member) of our church community is disciplined along a discipleship pathway in the context of a community that's tethered to a place (neighborhood) or space (network) of mission for renewal. Every owner revisits the discipleship pathway year by year within a community. Every disciple experiences discipleship firsthand, recognizing its importance, hardship, and beauty, and is led by folks who are just a little further ahead of them in the journey. While the trek may differ from time to time (perhaps experiencing a change in weather, terrain, guide, or individual experience), we all follow the same discipleship pathway.

Following the same discipleship pathway allows the community to notice our own growth and progress, and the familiarity of the journey produces joy and expectation. We not only see more and more ways we are individually and communally imitating Jesus, but we imitate his compassion and patience to journey alongside others in their discipleship. By moving discipleship from the periphery to the center, we are able to definitively say, "I am a disciple of Jesus, I know how I am a disciple of Jesus, and I know how to make disciples of Jesus."

If we're honest with ourselves, many of the places of Christian worship we attend have an underlying assumption that if we just maintain a weekly Sunday gathering where we hope and pray for an increased number of attendees, a thirty-minute oration and thirty minutes of singing religious songs will make disciples who live as a community for the sake of the world and culture around them. At best, discipleship becomes additive: an attendee feels a spark of inspiration from a message or song and invites her coworker the following week, hoping and praying that a thirty-minute

oration and thirty minutes of singing religious songs will make her co-worker into an imitator of Jesus. Even the most ideal version of this adds to a growing mindset of spectatorship where we simply gather weekly to listen to a speaker and hear musicians.

The praxis of imitating Christ has nothing to do with just listening and hearing. Jesus closes his Sermon on the Mount, where he offers practical wisdom about how to live like him for the sake of the culture and world around us, with this:

Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Mt 7:17-27)

Jesus is saying that Christlike praxis is about listening and doing. Christlike praxis is about seeing the fruit of transformation and renewal not only in his disciples but through his disciples. A sent community of people who listens to Jesus and does what he tells them to do together will not be limited to gathering weekly to listen to a sermon and sing songs. They'll be on the move together into the culture and world around them. Living into the praxis of self-giving love as a sent community is not an elective for disciples of Jesus. It's the main thing.

## A NOTE ON SUNDAY SERVICES

It's worth mentioning that as we immerse ourselves in the work of moving discipleship from the periphery to the center, it will often feel at odds with our current framework in how to "do church," most specifically in how we view our weekly Sunday worship services. I am in no way trying to minimize the importance, history, and value of the community congregating as a response in public worship and celebration of God; on the contrary, I am delineating the difference between intentional discipleship and equipping and intentional worship and proclamation. They are not interchangeable. The crowds in the Gospel accounts were often astounded by what Jesus did, but few remained behind to be his true followers.<sup>7</sup> In keeping discipleship central, we as leaders also need to view our public worship services appropriately, neither heralding them as the main measure of success nor minimizing them into privatized and individualized religion. JR Woodward writes:

We need to move from idolizing or demonizing public [worship] space, to re-imagining it for our context today. We need to develop a theology of the crowds which prevents us from insidiously becoming captive to them or allured by them, to finding ways to spontaneously and subversively proclaim the Good News in a way that unmask the ideologies that people are captive to, and opens their eyes to the reality of the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup>

While moving discipleship from periphery to center can and ought to coincide with a compelling public worship that proclaims the reality of the kingdom of God, centering discipleship emphasizes that imitating Jesus doesn't mainly happen in public worship.

## IMITATION GAME

When we as leaders make the pointed decision to move discipleship from periphery to center, we are making a hopeful and calculated decision to embed discipleship within a reimagined framework. We're stating that imitation is more important than instruction. We want disciples doing life amid a missional (sent) community that's a vibrant part of the local context rather than an institutionalized and overgeneralized

(and non-decolonized) church. We see a vision for the movement of the kingdom of God on this side of new creation over paltry social clubs and charity events. When we begin the good and hard work of making discipleship central, we dedicate our own leadership to imitation, communities on mission together, and a vision for movement.

**Table 1.1.** Leadership focus: Centered versus peripheral discipleship

<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Centered discipleship</b>	<b>Peripheral discipleship</b>
<i>Emphasis on:</i>	Imitation (discipleship)	Instruction (sermon)
<i>Moving people to:</i>	Community around them	Sunday worship service
<i>Vision for:</i>	Movement	Church

The apostle Paul invites the churches in Corinth to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1 GW). But in our local community, I am not the person the community is trying to imitate. The community actually imitates Melissa as she imitates Christ. An office manager and mother of two, Melissa took on the role of organizing a weekly potluck community dinner from year one and improved it leaps and bounds by setting it up in her own condominium. She strategically counted how many households were within her “neighborhood,” invited them to pull up a beach chair or dining chair right outside their front doors, and led them in talking story together in a regular rhythm. As the disciples within that neighborhood committed themselves to pray for their immediate next-door neighbors, this simple dinner grew into a force to be reckoned with. That lower-middle-class former farming community is now a spearhead in meeting the needs of the impoverished around them.

The community imitates Timmy as he imitates Christ. Timmy is a physical therapist and was once a self-proclaimed come-late-leave-early church attendee. He committed himself to a discipleship core to be more fully equipped and is now leading, teaching, and equipping a new group of disciples, intentionally helping them partner with organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs and the local food bank to connect Christlike identity to Christlike praxis.

The community imitates Keven as he imitates Christ. A former tennis all-star, Keven combined his passion for sports with Jesus’ heart for his

community. He started a missional community oriented around pickleball and is now intentionally connecting that community to discipleship, where non-Jesus-followers are attending a worship service for the first time.

The community imitates Kelci, a hospice nurse and impassioned advocate for the elderly who invites others to care for the low-income seniors in her neighborhood (all five hundred of them, who know her by name). She has discipled them in such a manner that these disciples are now discipling the seniors they faithfully love and serve—they've learned the secret of not just doing meaningful charitable work but connecting it the centrality of discipleship.

I invite you to consider holding both your perception and perspective on discipleship with open hands. I invite you to consider hitting the pause button on your regular ways of regarding discipleship. I invite you to step back and see a bigger, wider vision for discipleship as central. This book is intended to lead you out of the weeds and into centered, practical discipleship that transforms our communities. This requires assessing both our traditional interpretations of discipleship and our point of view on its role in our lives. I invite you to make discipleship central.



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