

10 TOP DISCIPLE-MAKING TRENDS TODAY



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BY BOBBY HARRINGTON

OPENING WORDS

At Discipleship.org, we champion discipleship-first people – those who see life through the lens of being disciples *of Jesus* who make disciples *with Jesus*. These people form a tribe, which we call “discipleship-first” people. Discipleship.org exists to help people who identify with this tribe to be faithful and effective disciple makers.

Discipleship.org is like the “chamber of commerce” for disciple making, in one sense: we aggregate and promote partner leaders, organizations, speakers, and writers for disciple making, like the chamber of commerce does for businesses.

As point-leader for Discipleship.org, I get a front-row seat to what is happening with disciple making in North America and beyond. This front-row view has enabled me to prayerfully filter through many conversations about disciple making during the last year. From these observations, I’ve compiled the top trends and summarized them below. The first five are wide-spread observations, and the last five are trending needs. We encourage you to consider how you might be a part of answering those five needs.

5 TOP OBSERVATIONS ABOUT DISCIPLE-MAKING TODAY

1.

MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE CALLING FOR A DISCIPLE MAKING FOCUS

This chorus of people calling for more of a disciple-making focus has been rising for several years now. Yet it continues to come, and from diverse groups, too. The Gospel Coalition, missional leaders, pastors on the left, pastors on the right, and pastors down the middle want to move their church toward making disciples. Thoughtful Christians intuitively know that our culture is increasingly discipling Christians to reflect the values and practices of the world. We also know that we need a counter-action plan – a Jesus-style discipleship plan.

It is hard to argue with the assertion that the solution is making disciples because that is what Jesus modelled and taught us to do.

So it makes sense, for example, that a new book on Millennials entitled *The Passion Generation: The Seemingly Reckless, Definitely Disruptive, But Far from Hopeless Millennials* by Grant Skeldon would epitomize this trend. The first half of the book points out that the church is experiencing a challenge with Millennials simply because the church has neglected discipleship. Skeldon shines a clear light on the root issue: learning how to truly make disciples.

It is not hard to see that many of the problems in the church can be addressed by going back to disciple making.

2. THERE ARE MANY DISCIPLE MAKING ADVOCATES BUT FEW EFFECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

Many people talk about disciple making, but few effectively practice it. Don't get me wrong, all the talk can be good. For example, it is a regular theme at Catalyst and Exponential, and well-known people like David Platt and Francis Chan are speaking and writing about it.

But there is a problem.

There are many speakers, advocates, and strategists, but I have strangely found fewer effective practitioners.

It is easier to see the need for disciple making and hypothesize on how it should be done, than it is to actually be effective at living it out.

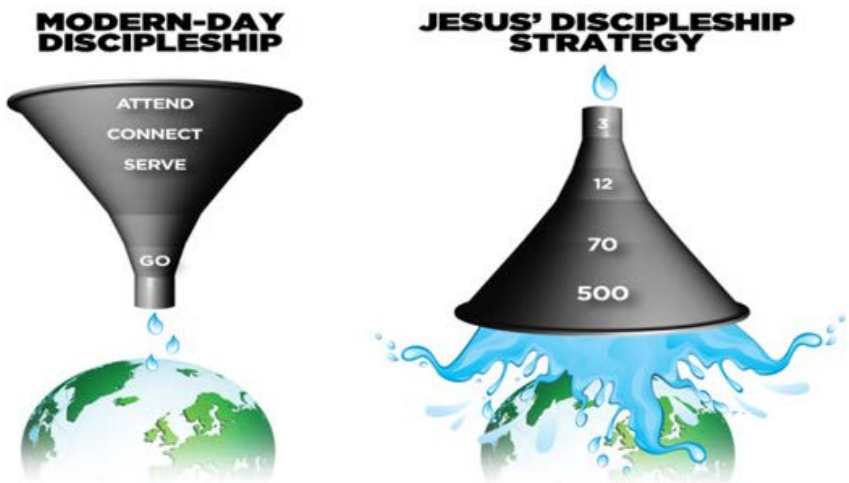
Every time I hear a disciple-making advocate, I think, *What is their track record? How effective are they at this craft?*

Long-term effective disciple making is hard work because helping people grow and change is hard work. People are messy. So a focus on disciple making is a focus on something that requires great love, patience, wisdom, intentionality, and skill.

The identifiable difference between those who talk about it and those who do it is their depth of understanding, lifestyle, and track record. I am praying for and cheering on everyone who gets in the disciple-maker game and stays in there. There is nothing in life more important and challenging.

3. MORE AND MORE LEAD PASTORS ARE LOOKING FOR HELP

It is really tough to be a lead pastor today. I know this first hand because I am a lead pastor. There are many challenges, but there is no greater challenge, in my experience, than seeking to change from a primary focus on Sunday-morning programming to Jesus-style disciple making. The following graphic demonstrates the contrast between these two models.



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Note the outcome of each model. On the right, we see that Jesus created a disciple-making movement that, over time, witnessed many disciples who went out and made disciples. Today, represented by the image on the left, we see lead pastors and other church leaders who emphasizes weekend gatherings. These gatherings do not create the outcome (at the end of the funnel) of disciple making movements – if that's all a church does. There's

a place for church services, no doubt! But that alone doesn't produce disciples, at least not Jesus-style disciples.

A shift to Jesus-style disciple making can be frightening, even overwhelming – especially for those who are successful with the weekend-church model. But there is help. There are models and there are guides.

4. PEOPLE HAVE TROUBLE FINDING SPECIFIC METHODS AND TOOLS

A few years ago, I found myself regularly making the case for changing to a focus on disciple making. As the points above demonstrate, I do not have to do that very much anymore. It is now simply intuitive for most leaders that we should focus on disciple making. But there is a new challenge that I am facing now.

It's about methods and tools.

This usually surfaces in a two-part sentence: the first part states their conviction and the second part describes their question. "I do not need any persuasion about disciple making," they say, "I just want someone to tell me how to do it."

This is good... and not so good.

It is good because it shows that people have moved beyond the basic question of focusing on disciple making. They get it now, which is good because they typically have developed convictions and passion about disciple making. But it is not so good because it is hard to tell people exactly how they should do it in their particular context. There are innumerable cultural issues to work through, depending on one's context. There are church structure and systems issues, along with theological nuances for various denominational and non-denominational tribes.

But the quest itself is ultimately good because we're now focused on the right question. Knowing how to make disciples practically in my context – that is where the rubber meets the road. I'm convinced that our effectiveness at this level will determine our success in the coming years.

5. DISCIPLESHIP.ORG'S PARTNERS ARE BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURES AND TOOLS TO HELP

This point is one of the most encouraging developments in the last several years. I've compiled a list of disciple-making organizations, in alphabetical order, who have partnered with Discipleship.org, as we seek to fan into flame the missions of these organizations. These organizations have been building their ministries for years, and many have developed significant numbers of staff, tools, and systems to help churches with disciple making. One of my favorite parts of my job is to connect people like you with organizations like these.

From the beginning, we have sought to fan into flame ministries of these partners:

- The Bonhoeffer Project (thebonhoefferproject.com)
- D6 Family (d6family.com)
- Dandelion Resourcing (dandelionresourcing.com)
- discipleFIRST (disciplefirst.com)
- Downline Ministries (downlineministries.com)
- Exponential (exponential.org)
- Faith International University (faithseminary.edu)
- Final Command (finalcommand.com)
- Global Discipleship Initiative (theglobaldiscipleshipinitiative.org)

- Grace and Truth Living (graceandtruthliving.com)
- Impact Ministries (impactdisciples.com)
- Life-on-Life Missional Discipleship (lifeonlife.org)
- LifeWay (lifeway.com)
- Lionshare (lionshare.org)
- National Coalition of Ministries to Men (ncmm.org)
- Navigator Church Ministries (navigatorchurchministries.org)
- Radical Mentoring (radicalmentoring.com)
- Relational Discipleship Network (relationaldiscipleshipnetwork.com)
- Renew Network (renew.org)
- Replicate (replicate.org)
- Small Circle (disciplexchange.com)
- Sonlife (sonlife.com)
- TCM International (tcmi.org)
- Untangle Addictions (untangleaddictions.com, healthy-mindmd.com)

I am grateful for the growth of these organizations because they all help provide churches with the kind of specific guidance, coaching, systems, and tools necessary for systemic change. There are no easy fixes, solutions, or methods.

5 TOP NEEDS FOR DISCIPLE MAKING TODAY

The first five trends are very encouraging and inspiring. We are grateful to God for each of them.

Now I want to transition from *describing* current trends to *prescribing* actions based on the needs that we are observing. We encourage you to consider how you can adopt the following practices. We believe they are foundational to the long-term effectiveness of the discipleship-first tribe.

6. GET PEOPLE INTO GOD'S WORD

People need God's Word. The North American church needs to re-iterate her emphasis here. In generations past, this has been the norm, but not any more. In order to be faithful to God, we must maintain a high view of God's Word – the inspired, reliable, trustworthy, and even infallible (when properly defined) Word of God. His Word is our ultimate and final authority.

God's Word – spoken and written – changes lives, and it works like nothing else.

As the *Reveal Study* from almost fifteen years ago shows (revealforchurch.com), and as various independent studies have subsequently confirmed: daily engagement with the Word of God is the greatest single change factor for spiritual growth. This is why 2 Timothy 3:16- 4:5 teaches that Scripture has been given to us for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness. We are living in a time when people are gathering around them teachers who say what their itching ears want to hear, to paraphrase Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3.

True Jesus-style disciple making depends on God's Word.

Takeaway: Find ways to help people to know and follow God's Word.

7. PROVIDE SIMPLE WAYS TO GET INTO THE WORD

The most effective method of Bible study is one which simply and regularly gets people into the raw Word. We are *not* talking about books *about the Bible* or inspirational devotionals *from the Bible* – or even application of the truths *in the Bible*. Each of these have a place.

But nothing replaces the actual Word of God.

What changes lives the most is the plain Word of God as preserved in Scripture. I keep seeing this and hearing about it from partner organizations and beyond. When people get into the Word of God themselves, it is often surprising how little guidance from experts they actually need - especially when they are seeking to learn the biggest life-changing truths about God. This is why methods like *Discovery Bible Study* (dbsguide.org), *Oral Bible Storytelling* (orality.net), and the Immerse Bible (instituteformiblereading.org) can be so effective in disciple making.

Takeaway: Find ways to overcome the two biggest barriers keeping people from God's Word today - time and practice. Help people make time by introducing them to simple ways of reading the Word of God for themselves.

8.

ENCOURAGE LIFE-ON-LIFE RELATIONSHIPS

God's plan for disciple making has always been relational. We call Deuteronomy 6:6-9 the great commission before the Great Commission because it was the original mandate of God to make disciples. It was for parents to disciple their children. The Jews call this part of the Bible the *Shema* (which is the Hebrew word for hear, listen, and obey—all encapsulated in one word). Carefully note the life-on-life disciple making focus of this mandate:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

This model is the exact same model that Jesus used with his disciples. He told them about God's kingdom and the teachings of Scripture as he and his disciples 1) sat in homes, 2) walked along the roads, 3) and during their sleeping and waking times together.

Contra the educational discipleship model (which focuses on the classroom), Jesus-style disciple making incorporates all of life, which moves beyond church buildings and programs. This practice ensures that disciples apply the teachings of God's Word to their entire life.

The apostle Paul described this same life-on-life disciple making model to his disciple Timothy:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. (2 Timothy 3:10-11)

There is just no substitute for life-on-life if we want to help people to grow as disciples.

Takeaway: Orient your church's disciple-making practices around real-life situations and contexts, not just at the church or in programs.

9.

TEACH PEOPLE “OBEDIENCE-BASED DISCIPLESHIP.”

Obedience has fallen on hard times. We are so concerned with being grace oriented and the role of the Holy Spirit in transformation that we forget about the dynamics of obedience. Obedience always begins with grace and it's always empowered by the Spirit, but it's never done apart from our will – and active participation (cf. Philippians 2:12-13). Lets learn to properly emphasize obedience again.

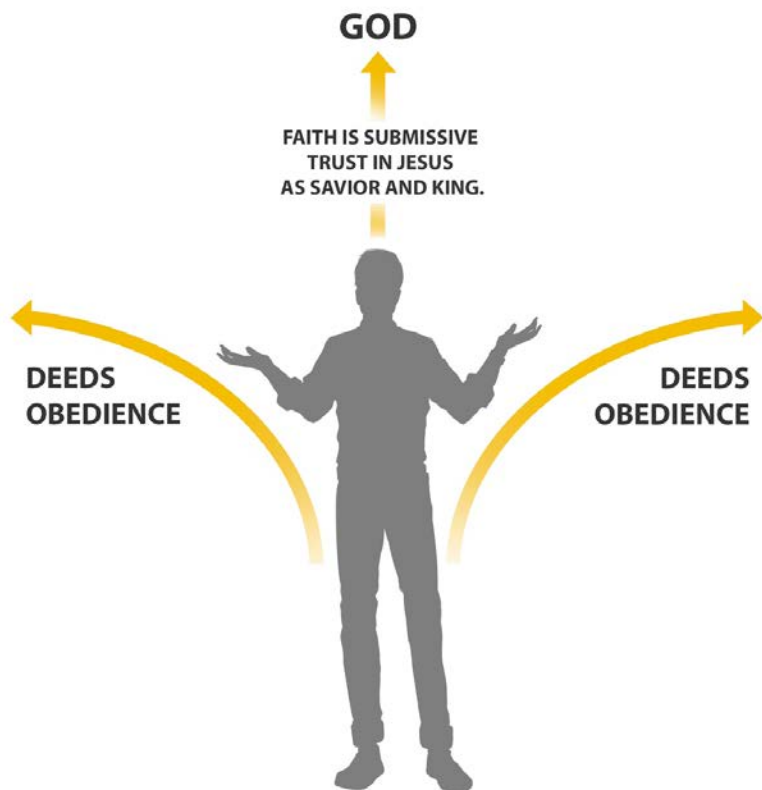
Carefully notice our role of obedience in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20:

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.

Jesus did not command us to teach everything he commanded but to teach people to *obey* everything he commanded.

There is a really big difference between the two. Obedience-based discipleship is what the New Testament as a whole teaches us, so I created a diagram to show how faith and obedience function in the Bible: We must return to models like this one.

THE ACTION OF FAITH



SAVING FAITH IS FAITHFUL FAITH. FAITH IS TO TRUST AND FOLLOW JESUS. FAITH IS ALLEGIANCE. FAITH IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH WE ENTRUST OURSELVES TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THEN IT REVOLUTIONIZES AND CHANGES ALL WE THINK AND DO, AS WE BECOME MORE AND MORE LIKE JESUS CHRIST.

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Takeaway: Lets start talking more about “obedience based discipleship” and find healthy ways to recapture the hearts and minds of a new generation so that we can champion obedience to God.

10. LEARN HOW TO FAST AND PRAY AND LEAD OTHERS TO DO THE SAME

As we've studied disciple-making movements around the world – and learned that there are currently *no* true disciple making movements in North America (at this time), we came to one important conclusion. They do something that *we do not commonly practice*... they emphasize regular prayer and fasting!

This is why we host Shodankeh Johnson (who leads a disciple making movement in Africa) at our National Forums and why we consult with organizations like Final Command Ministries, New Generations, and others from around the world who are making disciples by emphasizing prayer and fasting (check out the free eBook, Kingdom Unleashed on Discipleship.org). We want to learn how to fast and pray the way Jesus did and the way that Christians around the world today and throughout history have – so that we can petition God to move in a strong way among us. We do not believe fasting and praying automatically makes disciples or causes God to do one thing or the other (because there are nuances to how God works), but we do believe a fasting-and-prayer-focus is a vital key that is lacking in many efforts to make disciples today.

Takeaway: Grow in prayer and fasting and encourage leaders and everyday-disciples to engage more regularly in fasting and prayer. Discipleship.org partnered with David Clayton (one of our National Forum speakers) to publish a practical tool to help you and your church learn to fast and pray. It's a short book called *Revival Starts Here*. You can order this Discipleship.org resource by [clicking here](#).

CONCLUDING WORDS

We believe this is an exciting time for disciple making as the church increasingly refines and encourages these efforts in North America and beyond. We believe that the way Jesus made disciples is the best way for helping people trust and follow him today – in any culture, any place and any time!

Thanks for letting Discipleship.org and our partners help to guide you in this quest.

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