

Discipleship & Church Size

Pastor Mike Barnhart

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Discipleship.

What is it?

I often use the term *Christ-follower* and talk about *following Jesus*. With various church and life experiences represented among those at FBC, it's important to understand what it means to follow Jesus. Although following Jesus looks unique to each person, there are some commonalities of being a Christ-follower, which apply to all of us who are redeemed by the blood of Christ.

In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus says: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Here, Jesus invites us to himself. Coming to Jesus is what it means to be his disciple. Yes, discipleship is repenting from sin. Yes, it is turning in faith to believe in Christ. Yes, it is obeying Jesus' teachings. Discipleship is all of this, yet at a very basic level, discipleship is *coming to Jesus*. Jesus invites and calls his people to himself, and his people hear and respond to his voice.¹

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be united to Christ, which means: we are in Christ; Christ is in us; we are like Christ; and we are with Christ.² The gospel provides us with three new and Christ-centered functions: (1) identity; (2) lifestyle; and, (3) worldview. Our identity is the core of who we are. In Christ, we take on a new identity as children of God.³ The gospel also supplies us with a new lifestyle. We now live and are learning to live in the Jesus-way.⁴ Finally, the gospel grants us a new and Christ-centered worldview with which we see our circumstances and the happenings of this world.⁵

Sanctification.

This is the work that God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—does in us and with us so that we become people who fully and completely treasure him while bearing his image. Sanctification only happens as we follow Jesus. In other words, we must be disciples who align our lives with the way of our teacher, Jesus.

Although we have received the fullness of the gospel—God with us—, and our sanctification and glorification in Christ are secure, we are not yet complete. Our sanctification begins with and flows from our justification in Christ. The Holy Spirit continuously sanctifies us throughout

¹ John 6:44; John 10:3-4.

² Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9; Romans 12:5; John 15:5; John 17:21; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Matthew 28:20; 1 Corinthians 1:9; Hebrews 12:22-24.

³ Ephesians 1:5.

⁴ Galatians 2:20; John 14:6.

⁵ Romans 12:1-2.

this life, as we cooperate with him. Even though none will be perfectly sanctified in this life, some will be sanctified more or less than others, so comparisons with one another are not usually helpful.

God's plan is *not only* that you would be sanctified but that all of his people would be sanctified. That's why Jesus gave us our marching orders in Matthew 28:18-20: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." God not only *invites* us to make disciples, he *commands* us to do so. Part of our own sanctification is to be in community with others for the purpose of sanctification—ours and theirs.

How Does Discipleship Happen?

Three words: instruction, community, practice.

Discipleship practices in local churches vary by denomination, tradition, culture, and church size; however, there are three aspects of discipleship that are always present: instruction, community, and practice.

We must be instructed by the word of God. We must depend on God and the body of Christ. We must take intentional next steps to practice applying God's instruction. All of this is done while we remain dependent upon God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While being immersed in biblical instruction, gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice, there are still a plethora of more specific discipleship methods to which a local church may adhere. The main point I am trying to make is that discipleship—following Jesus—must involve biblical instruction, gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice. In a person's life, if one is emphasized in such a way that another is absent, growth in Christ will not take place as evidently as when all three are present. This is a partnership between God and us.

Therefore, at FBC, we are emphasizing: **worship, connect, invest, & go**. We gather together for worship weekly, at which time we are instructed by the word. We encourage daily Bible reading. Whether you're an adult, teen, or child, we connect together in life groups, Sunday school classes, and Bible studies. We desire to be part of smaller groups in which we can share in gospel-rooted community. We invest in God's kingdom by giving and serving, and we go with the gospel, as a way of practicing what God's word instructs. Of course, there are many ways to be faithfully disciplined through biblical instruction, gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice. It's not limited to those formal ministries.

How Does Church Size Affect Discipleship?

Over a decade ago, I first read an article by Pastor Tim Keller called, *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics*. I was on staff at a growing church at the time. The church staff and I read and discussed the article. It was fascinating! It wasn't a new strategy or ministry method that

surprised me; it was how accurate the content described my church experiences that proved most surprising. Since I first read this article over a decade ago, I have seen much of what is conveyed in this article about church size align with my personal experiences in local churches.

Since I was a child, I have regularly attended six churches in five states, ranging from 70 people to 7,000 people in weekend attendance. In each of these churches, there were distinctions in theology and doctrine, denomination, culture, and tradition. However, the most striking difference I noticed in each of these six churches was in how they viewed discipleship.

Of these six churches, the churches that emphasized biblical instruction, some form of gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice were the churches that grew spiritually, and sometimes numerically. The churches that did not emphasize all three of those aspects of discipleship saw decline in spiritual health (i.e. arguments over petty things, disunity regarding non-essentials to faith in Christ) and a significant decrease in church participation.

The interesting thing I noticed was that all six churches thought they were emphasizing biblical instruction, gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice; yet, they weren't.

So, what happened?

Over time, the people in the churches changed (i.e. aging, moving/transition, kids at home vs. empty-nesters) and the community in which these churches resided changed (i.e. economics, community issues, culture). And over time, the size of the churches changed. The churches that saw their spiritual health increase were the churches that changed their discipleship and leadership strategies to match the changes in their church size. A strategy change did not equate to a change in doctrine or belief. Those churches that decreased in spiritual health (and usually a decrease in participation too) did so because they did not adjust their discipleship and leadership philosophies according to their church size.

Here's my point in sharing this with you: Although discipleship is always about following Jesus—through biblical instruction, gospel-rooted community, and intentional practice—church size is one of the most significant variables that affects discipleship and leadership strategy in the church. The bottom line is, when church size changes, so must the discipleship and leadership strategies of the church. If they don't, growth—both spiritually and numerically—will be hindered, sometimes severely. This is true whether a church increases or decreases numerically.

I invite you to read Pastor [Tim Kellen's article, *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics*](#), for the purpose of considering how the size of a local church affects its discipleship ministries and leadership. Then, join me and others from our church to discuss this topic of discipleship and church size at our next session of Conversations With Leaders on Monday, October 14, 6:00-7:30 PM.