

Note: This is Part 1 in a 2-Part series on Barriers to Discipleship.

During a conference, I heard Bob Bickford say, “All Revitalization is Discipleship.” At first, I didn’t know what that statement meant. I had read a lot of books on revitalization, and discipleship is always a part, but it sounded like he was boiling down discipleship to be the main factor in all church revitalization.

But the more I thought about it and worked with churches, the more that I discovered that statement to be true. No, discipleship is not the *only thing* involved in a church revitalization, but it certainly is *the* underlying factor.

How can this be true? Consider what discipleship is and what happens in a declining church. Is a Church not declining in numbers because in some way they have failed to continue growing and maturing in Christ? Perhaps the conversation of “discipleship” has become boring for many. In 1980, Eugene Peterson wrote a [book](#) called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. This classic book on Discipleship was originally rejected by 17 publishers. It wasn’t “new” or “exciting” enough, but it was a needed book, rooted in the realities of the Christian life.

I was working with a church recently that has gone down to about 10 people, whereas 40 years ago, they were averaging closer to 80. After our team met with theirs, we saw one of the most glaring reasons why. The church has had one baptism since 2005, that’s one baptism in the past 17 years.

The church was not reaching their community, they were not doing evangelism, they had become stagnant where they were. But discipleship beckons a life of following Christ, continually. And just as God sanctifies believers, he also sanctifies his church. In [Philippians 2:12](#), Paul says to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” This means that there is something on our part when it comes to working out this faith in our lives. God sanctifies us, but we also have a part to play.

The same can be said true of our local church. When we stop growing in Christlikeness, we begin to fall apart. It’s true in our life as much as it is in the church.

And [Luke 9:23](#), Jesus gives us a good definition of Discipleship. He says “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”

This type of denial means that we sacrifice our desires, our wants, and our preferences, for the sake of following Jesus. This verse implies something that Paul picks up on later on in Galatians. That is that our desires (in the flesh) are actually set at odds with God’s desires. And that the desires of the flesh are against the desires of the spirit ([Gal. 5:17](#)).

This denial of self must be practiced in our churches, if we desire to grow in Christ.

Still in following Jesus, we face many barriers along the way. But it's difficult to overcome those barriers when we can't define them. Thankfully, [Walker Armstrong](#) was a guest on the podcast this week and gave several ways we can identify barriers to discipleship. Think about these closely, and seek to identify them in your own church.

#1. Human Ego

In the [book](#), *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, Tim Keller quotes Paul in [1 Corinthians 4:3](#), "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself." Keller argues that this was a totally unnatural view of self. Quite frankly, one needs the Holy Spirit to think of himself this way. It's not that Paul thought of himself *less*, it's that he didn't think of himself *at all*.

Human Ego naturally gets in the way of everything God wants to do in us and through us. When we think too highly of ourselves, it prohibits us from growing in our relationship with Christ. Likewise, in a church that wants to revitalize, the pastor, leaders, and members must do all they can to humble themselves and realize that it is not all about their image or reputation. If the end goal of a Church Revitalization is a changed trajectory of a congregation's spiritual life, that begins by following Christ's plan for his church again. It won't happen until we deny ourselves.

Just to recenter and focus back on its origins, it helps to ask this question: "Who does the Church belong to?" Here is Jesus' claim: "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it*" ([Matt. 16:18](#)). In [Colossians 1:18](#), who is the **head of the body**, the church? Who is the **chief shepherd** that gives the crown of glory in [1 Peter 5:4](#)? In [Revelation 2:1](#), who is it that holds in his hand the seven stars and walks among the golden lampstands? The name of Jesus Christ is on the deed of our churches. And no affidavit can transfer that title to us.

Paul [said](#) in Philippians that you must "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." and he explains how Jesus emptied himself, became a servant, and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. Jesus could have brought all attention to himself and escaped the accusations of religious leaders and Roman authority. Instead, he willingly brought himself low, and as a result, He is now exalted. This is the type of humility we are to have in a Church Revitalization or Replant. This humility actively denies self for the greater purpose of exalting Christ.

#2. Spiritual Consumerism

Another great barrier to real discipleship in a church is spiritual consumerism. The past generation has seen a wave of church growth techniques and resources to help churches grow a mile wide in numbers, but often an inch-deep in spiritual maturity. The sentiment is often to "get people's foot in the door," and immediately engage them with entertainment. Draw them in, and allow people to slowly learn about the love of God and the gospel.

I do not want to be too cynical. There are surely good and meaningful tips that can come from this advice. Many walk in the doors of church with aesthetically pleasing decor, catchy music, and a pastor with the latest clothing line and shoes. Some would never walk in the door of a smaller church because of personal preference. Indeed, some churches are “fishers” and some are “catchers,” to use a fishing analogy. I believe it can even be helpful to have a sanctuary and music that is appealing, an enjoyable worship experience, and a place for plenty of activities and events for kids and students.

But if a church is more focused on production and entertainment than spiritual maturity and depth, the numerical growth can be more of an unfortunate illusion. Churches that use entertainment as a replacement for gospel-saturated discipleship are not going and making disciples, they are going and appealing to consumers.

Where did this model come from? It did not come from New Testament Church principles, but American Culture. If we look at how the New Testament church grew, we see that it grew by adding *and by* multiplying. (1) How did the Jerusalem church go from 120 persons to over 5,000 ([Acts 2:41, 4:4](#))? **It was simply the clarity of the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the favor of God’s hand.** People got saved, and immediately were brought into the church family. (2) How did the New Testament Church *multiply*? They multiplied by being committed to the word of God, and by being obedient to the faith ([Acts 6:7](#)). This is what biblical discipleship looks like: commitment to the word and obedience in the faith. In [Matthew 28:20](#), Jesus says, “teach them to observe everything I have commanded them.”

Spiritual Consumerism is dangerously close to prosperity-gospel theology. The method of easy-believism is to have people believe in you or appreciate you at a superficial level by tickling their appetite with things that appeal to the eye. But pure charisma and entertainment can not turn a dying church around. I would venture to even say that the growth that often takes place in churches like this creates the illusion of God-glorifying life and vibrancy. When in actuality, it exposes the difference between a *believer* and a *disciple*. Anyone can believe in God, even the demons do ([James 2:19](#)). But where are the *followers*? The *disciples*?

Perhaps a litmus test is necessary to determine whether or not a church is focused on biblical discipleship or spiritual consumerism. As Paul said in Galatians 6:7, “whatever one sows, that he will also reap.” Therefore, we can determine the main focus of a church based on the type of disciple that this church produces. Believers who come to church to be entertained and leave with no life change have been visiting a church that is more focused on production than the gospel. But a disciple who not only hears the word of God, but does it, and one who is actively growing in Christlikeness, is part of a disciple-making church.

#3. Organizational Complexity

This may be one of the most important, practical barriers to overcome, especially in a re-plant situation. Every church has a few sacred cows, programs and ministries that they’ve held onto for years.

I remember attending a church once, and there was a new member class afterwards. I decided to go out of curiosity to see what the church was about. For a couple of *hours* I learned all about the different ministries and programs of the church, but I never once heard what was the mission or the vision of the church itself. I left with a great confusion about everything that the church offered, but never understood the purpose or driving force of this particular church body.

I believe this type of problem persists in many churches that have focused on programs and ministries. For many years, oftentimes without remembering the reason why they first began, churches added ministries on top of ministries. But in a replant or revitalization, simplicity is key. With organizational structure, the best thing a revitalizing church can do is get to its bare bones and focus on fellowship, worship, evangelism, discipleship, and unity.

We understand it can be difficult to recommend changes like this. However, it is important for the church to understand the complexity of structure. Would we rather run 12 ministries decently, or run 4 ministries extremely well? How can we be most effective and fruitful for the Kingdom of God? These are questions for churches to ponder.

There are other barriers to discipleship in a church, but I will give some others in a "Part 2." For more information on the books recommended, visit Peterson's book [here](#) and Keller's book [here](#).