

J. T. ENGLISH

DEEP

DISCIPLESHIP

HOW THE CHURCH CAN MAKE

WHOLE DISCIPLES OF JESUS

“What J.T. proposes for the local church is not only possible, it is mission critical. And it works. I have witnessed first-hand how making space for deep discipleship moves spiritual infants to maturity. As the church heads into the winds of secularism, she needs disciples who are deeply rooted, and it is her calling to make them so. For those compelled to move their churches beyond bare-minimum discipleship strategies, this book offers a way forward, drawing everyday disciples into the deeper things of God.”

Jen Wilkin, author and Bible teacher

“The contents of this book are not theory or hopeful musings. They have worked. I had the privilege of serving with J.T. for five years as these convictions and concepts took root at The Village Church in Dallas, Texas. Hundreds and hundreds of laymen and women grew in a robust understanding of the God of the Bible, transforming their lives and the worship and fervency of our church”

Matt Chandler, lead pastor, The Village Church,
Flower Mound, Texas; president, Acts 29

“J.T. English combines razor-sharp theology with deep pastoral intuition to give us a book we badly need. It is amazing how much we can be doing in our churches without actually engaging in the sort of deep discipleship which will keep us all growing, serving, witnessing, and worshipping for the rest of our lives. J.T. shows us how the local church can become ground zero for theological passion and training. I look forward to applying his wisdom and hope many churches will do the same!”

Sam Allberry, speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; associate pastor, Immanuel Church Nashville

“Pastor J.T. English is committed to helping us deepen our discipleship. There’s just not much to the shallow Christianity that typifies too many of our churches, and too many of our lives. If you want to be both challenged and instructed on how you can

change that, pick up this book. It might not take long to read, but its results may last a lifetime.”

Mark Dever, pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington DC; president, 9Marks

“In *Deep Discipleship*, J.T. English smartly and accurately diagnoses what is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the American church: the tendency to call Christians to less engagement, not more. In a well written and easily readable book, J.T. lays out a biblical blueprint for how pastors, leaders, and laypeople can call the church to be everything it was meant to be.”

Matt Carter, senior pastor,
Sagemont Church, Houston, Texas

“When I reflect on *Deep Discipleship*, words that come to mind are these: biblical, needful, practical, readable. Grounded in the Word of God and fleshed out in the real life of the local church, my friend J.T. English provides a roadmap for developing and maintaining a faithful and healthy discipleship ministry in a local church of any size and location. My hope and prayer is that God will use this book to multiply disciples and disciple makers around the world.”

Daniel L. Akin, president, Southeastern
Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book is a rare combination of theology and practice on one of the most important aspects of the faith. Discipleship, according to J.T. English, is rooted in Scripture, situated in the local church, and aimed at mission to the glory of God. I hope *Deep Discipleship* is read widely, and I am confident that it will lead to the making and maturing of deep and holistic disciples.”

Jeremy Treat (PhD, Wheaton College), pastor
for Preaching and Vision at Reality LA; author
of *Seek First* and *The Crucified King*

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INTRODUCTION

Diagnosing the Discipleship Disease

On Memorial Day weekend 2018 my wife and I were driving to see an orthopedic surgeon in Dallas. For several weeks she had been experiencing increasing amounts of pain in her right thigh. She is an active person, so we chalked it up to overuse—maybe she pulled something, or perhaps it was a slight tear. After weeks of stretching, icing, and lots of other remedies, we could not get the pain under control. We had to go see a doctor.

After asking us a list of questions, the doctors decided to perform an MRI to see if they could detect exactly what was going on. After the MRI we both sat nervously in the waiting room. All kinds of crazy things go through your head in a waiting room. Questions like: *Is this worse than we think it is? Is this*

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not as bad as we think it is? Is everything going to be okay? Is this going to require surgery and rehabilitation?

After a long wait we were called back to a small room to wait some more. We sat there for another thirty minutes, thoughts racing through our minds. Nothing could have prepared us for what would happen next. The doctor walked in, and some of the first words out of his mouth were, “I have got to be honest with you; this does not look good.”

It was like someone knocked all of the wind out of me. What does it mean that this does not look good? What is wrong? How bad is it? I did not know what we were about to hear, but I did know that I was not expecting it. He proceeded to tell us that it looked like Macy had a high-grade malignant sarcoma—*cancer*. Sarcomas are a cancerous tumor; “high-grade” meant it was fast-growing and had a high likelihood of spreading to other parts of her body. In a single visit to the doctor, we went from thinking she had a pulled muscle to thinking about what her life expectancy might be.

Since it was Memorial Day weekend, he told us he wanted to see us first thing on Tuesday morning to do a biopsy to confirm the initial diagnosis. That was the longest weekend of our lives. We had countless people over to our house to pray and ask for healing. We shed countless tears, sang worship songs, read Scripture, and wondered how this would impact our two little babies who were three years and nine months at the time. We begged God to perform a miracle.

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We went to the pool on Memorial Day to try to forget all that was happening and because the weightlessness of the water helped relieve some of her pain. I will never forget that we took a picture of all four of us in the pool. We were all smiling; we looked like a young, vibrant family without a care in the world. But on the inside we were terrified.

On Tuesday morning we went to the hospital to have a biopsy performed on the tumor in order to confirm the diagnosis. The biopsy lasted several hours, and I sat in the waiting room with our family and several friends. Over the next few hours doctors kept coming out to deliver news to other families. It seemed like lots of them were getting good news right there in the waiting room. Then a nurse came out to me and asked me to meet the doctor in a private conference room. I began to panic. *A private conference room? Why could he not share the information with me in the waiting room? Is it worse than he thought? Is it not as bad he thought?* I made my way to the conference room where he met me a few minutes later. He told me that the pathology report appeared to confirm the initial diagnosis, though he was a bit more optimistic that the tumor might not be as high-grade as he originally thought. However, he also said there were some unusual readings in the report and that he would like to send it off for further analysis at Harvard.

He told me that the treatment plan was likely going to be several rounds of radiation, followed by surgery to remove the

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tumor, followed by a fairly aggressive form of chemotherapy. His office began setting up appointments for consultations with radiologists and chemotherapists, and he would serve as her surgeon. Before we left, he instructed us not to begin any of her radiation treatment until we heard back from the pathologist at Harvard, just in case he had anything to add or changes with the diagnosis.

I could not believe he wanted to wait that long. If my wife had an aggressive form of cancer in her leg, I wanted to start treating it immediately. If it had a chance of spreading to other parts of her body, how could we let it just stay in her leg while we were waiting for another consultation? He assured us that though he was relatively confident in his diagnosis, that it is always better to be 100-percent confident before beginning any treatment plan. He said that the risk of misdiagnosing her illness would lead to mistreating her illness, which could be catastrophic. In this case, misdiagnosis and mistreatment could be fatal. In other words, we needed to know exactly what we were dealing with before we came up with a specific game plan for treatment.

So, we just had to play the waiting game. Over the next ten days we began all of our consultations and setting up her radiation schedule. These were some of the longest and hardest days of our lives. Her pain was increasing, and no matter what form of pain medicine she took, we could not get it under control. I began thinking about the nightmare of what it would be like

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to raise our two kids by myself. We spent time driving all over the city doing more scans on her leg and full-body scans to see if the cancer had spread anywhere else. We were in the depths of despair.

Around 6:00 p.m. on June 13, we got a call from the doctor, but because Macy's phone was on silent, we missed it. We frantically listened to the voicemail, and he said to call him as soon as we could because he had an important update for us. We called back . . . busy signal.

We called again . . . busy signal.

Third time, and we finally got through.

He began to tell us that he just received a report from the Harvard pathologist that suggested Macy had been misdiagnosed—she did not have cancer. *What? Misdiagnosed? Everything we had been doing, all the sleepless nights, all the scans, prayers, everything we had lived for the past few weeks was for nothing?*

If it was not cancer, then what was it? Her pain was still overwhelming, and we knew for sure that she had a mass in her leg. “Well, if it is not cancer,” I asked the doctor, “do you know what it is now? And how confident are you?” He proceeded to tell us that he believed that Macy had a rare blood pool that formed as the result of some localized trauma, like tweaking a muscle, bumping her hip, or something like that. The small blood pool was beginning to form into a hard mass in her thigh, kind of like a bone. This condition is known as

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myositis ossificans, which is a benign tumor known to mimic more aggressive pathological tumors like a sarcoma. He said it was still going to be a long and painful recovery, but that it was not deadly or threatening in any way.

She had been misdiagnosed. She did not have cancer. This meant no radiation, no surgery, and no chemotherapy.

For the first few hours we just celebrated, cried, worshipped, called family and friends with the good news, and hugged each other. Eventually we began to process everything that had transpired over the previous few weeks. It was so hard to get our minds around the fact that she did not have cancer.

Those three weeks indelibly shaped the rest of our lives. We will never be able to un-live them. We cannot un-cry those tears. We will not get back those sleepless nights, begging God to act. Those three weeks, the misdiagnosis, the sleepless nights, the prayer meetings, the friends and family who pleaded with God on our behalf—I can remember all of it like it was yesterday.

The Danger of a Misdiagnosis

One of the many lessons we learned in that season was the importance of getting a diagnosis right. What if we had proceeded quickly with radiation before we heard back from the specialist? What if we had begun treatment too soon, a treatment that would have done more harm than good? What

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if we were so convinced she had cancer that we proceeded with confidence into a treatment plan for a disease she did not have? Even though our first doctor got the initial diagnosis wrong, I am thankful that he had the sense to get another opinion before moving forward with treatment, because in this case misdiagnosis and mistreatment could have been deadly. Getting the treatment right depends entirely on getting the diagnosis right.

I believe, similarly, that the local church has a discipleship disease. And without the proper diagnosis and treatment plan, we will do more harm than good.

Over the past several decades the Western church has noticed alarming symptoms of our discipleship disease. Some of these symptoms include people leaving the church; students dropping out of church after high school; attendance dropping; and perhaps most important, a lack of seriousness among our people about what it really means to be a follower of Christ. From an examination of these symptoms, we've come to think our disease is that the church has become increasingly irrelevant and requires too much from people who want to get involved. We see that we are losing market share in the world of ideas and in the rhythms of people's everyday lives.

The church seems to think our disease is that we've gotten too deep.

In order to treat this disease, we have sought to develop ministry strategies that require less of people, not more, strategies that focus on keeping disciples in the church rather than

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growing disciples in the church, and that view the pastor more as a marketer than a minister. We are on our heels, and we just want the bleeding to stop, so we have lowered the bar, and we have settled for a lowest-common-denominator discipleship.

Unfortunately, I believe many of us have misdiagnosed the disease and are mistreating the church.

Our ministry disease is not that the evangelical church is too deep, but that it is far too shallow. The symptoms of people and students leaving the church, or the lack of maturing disciples, or decreased attendance are symptoms that should tell us not that we are too deep but that we are too trivial.

People are leaving not because we have given them too much but because we have given them far too little. They are leaving the church because we have not given them any reason to stay. We are treating the symptoms of the wrong disease. Deep discipleship is about giving people more Bible, not less; more theology, not less; more spiritual disciplines, not less; more gospel, not less; more Christ, not less.

People are leaving the church not because we have asked too much of them but because we have not asked enough of them. We are giving people a shallow and generic spirituality when we need to give them distinctive Christianity. We have tried to treat our discipleship disease by appealing to the lowest common denominator, oversimplifying discipleship, and taking the edges off what it means to follow Christ.

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Put simply, we have settled for a shallow approach to discipleship, believing that breadth will lead to depth. We have adopted philosophies of ministry that focus on growing crowds instead of growing Christians. We have asked our pastors to be marketers, not ministers of the gospel. In the church we focus on keeping people, but if they want to grow, they have to go outside the church. We think about how to keep people rather than how to form people.

I believe it is time for the church to ask some serious questions about our shared disease and how we can begin to create depth that might lead to breadth. Perhaps the church should start thinking about what it means to go deeper with fewer instead of going wider with the many. What if our cultural moment is inviting the church to embody the depth and substance of the Christian faith, not a shallow spirituality that appeals to the masses?

Not only that, but what if we could think through a philosophy of ministry that helped people grow and mature into deep and holistic disciples? What if we could develop and implement a philosophy of ministry that helped us not only appeal to the lowest common denominator but created a dissatisfaction with people staying there? What if we asked better questions about our philosophy of ministry that eventually led to the growth and flourishing of mature and holistic disciples in the context of the local church?

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My hope in this book is to introduce a paradigm that will help local churches implement a philosophy of ministry that will grow and mature deep and holistic disciples. My hope is that local churches would grow in their confidence that if we focus on growing disciples we will build the church, but if we focus on growing the church, we may neglect building disciples. The primary way I intend to do this is to reframe the philosophy of ministry by asking better questions. By asking better questions, I think we will also come up with better answers.

The first question in chapter 1 is, “Why does deep discipleship matter?” Specifically, we will consider the nature and character of God and explore how his inexhaustible beauty, glory, and riches matter for developing deep disciples. In this chapter I will make the case that our philosophy of ministry should not just be informed by what God does but, more important, who God is.

The second question will be covered in chapters 2 and 3. Instead of asking the question, “Where *can* we form holistic disciples?,” I want us to ask the better question, “Where *should* we form holistic disciples?” This is ultimately the question of space: where should deep discipleship happen? In these chapters we will look at why the primary context for discipleship is in the local church. Discipleship outside the local church is exploding because discipleship inside the local church is neglected, but we will see that Jesus has commissioned the local

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church specifically to teach, form, and develop maturing followers of Christ.

Not only will we see that disciples are formed in the local church, but that local churches should think intentionally about what spaces they are using to form holistic disciples. Are disciples formed primarily in the gathering, in-home groups, or in educational environments? In this chapter I will make the case that the local church should consider how community-based approaches to ministry would benefit by the retrieval of a rich understanding and implementation of Christian education. The context of discipleship has massive implications for what kind of disciples they will be.

The third question we will reframe in chapter 4 is about scope. Instead of asking the question, “What do disciples *want?*,” we need to ask the better question, “What do disciples *need?*” Too many of our ministry philosophies follow a consumeristic mind-set that tries to give disciples what they want instead of giving them what they need. In order to make growing and maturing followers of Christ, how should the church intentionally be training their people so they may be equipped to equip others?

The fourth question, addressed in chapter 5, has to do with how we can make maturing disciples of Christ. Instead of asking the question, “How do we *maintain* disciples in the local church?,” I want to ask the better question, “How do we *grow* disciples in the local church?” The local church should not just

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focus on how we keep disciples but on how we grow them. Local churches need to think through how they can develop a philosophy of ministry that will do just that. Depth with God is the way of holistic discipleship.

The fifth question is about sending disciples. Instead of asking the question, “Where do *some* disciples go?,” I want to ask the better question, “Where do *all* disciples go?” As holistic disciples are being shaped and formed in the context of the local church, we need to be intentional about sending them into their spheres of influence to make more disciples. Discipleship never terminates with a disciple; all disciples are called to go make more disciples.

The final question is about scalability, sustainability, and strategy. Instead of asking the question, “*Can* my church do this?,” I want to ask the better question, “Why would my church *not* do this?” This final question gets to the heart of why deep discipleship in the local church is scalable, sustainable, and strategic.

But before we turn to the *what* of deep discipleship, we must be reminded about *why* deep discipleship matters.

Instead of asking: “Where *can* we make disciples?,” we will ask, “Where *should* we make disciples?”

Instead of asking: “What do disciples *want*?,” we will ask, “What do disciples *need*?”

Instead of asking: “How do we *maintain* disciples?,” we will ask, “How do we *grow* disciples?”

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Instead of asking: “Where do *some* disciples go?,” we will ask, “Where do *all* disciples go?”

Instead of asking: “*Can* my church do this?,” we will ask, “Why would we *not* do this?”

Main Ideas

1. The local church has a discipleship disease. Without the proper diagnosis and treatment plan, we will do more harm than good.

2. The church seems to think our disease is that we’ve gotten too deep. In order to treat this disease, we have sought to develop ministry strategies that require less of people, not more. We have lowered the bar and settled for a lowest-common-denominator discipleship.

3. People are leaving the church, not because we have asked too much of them but because we have not asked enough of them. We are giving people a shallow and generic spirituality when we need to give them distinctive Christianity.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you agree that the church has a discipleship disease? Have you ever tried to articulate it?

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2. How have you tried—whether consciously or unconsciously—to treat this discipleship disease? Has your church lowered the bar or raised the bar of discipleship?
3. Are you convinced that lowering the bar is a mistreatment of our discipleship disease? If not, what would it take to convince you at this point?

To-Do List

1. Define in one or two sentences the church's discipleship disease.
2. Describe, at a high level, what an appropriate treatment plan might be.
3. Begin to discuss and write down ideas about how that treatment plan could be contextualized in your local church.

CHAPTER 1

A God-Centered Vision for Discipleship

I took a short sabbatical during the winter of 2019. It was my first sabbatical in ministry, and I am so thankful for the time away that was afforded to my family and me. For a few days I spent some time at Lake Tahoe alone. I wanted to use this as a time of renewal, rest, and rejuvenation. I had been to Lake Tahoe once before, but on this trip in particular, when I was there by myself, I was struck by the majesty of God's creation.

Lake Tahoe is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. The beautiful Sierra Nevada Mountains reach up to crisp, blue sky and cascade down into the depths of the lake. On my trip I learned that the lake itself is one of the deepest in the United States, at 1,645 feet, behind only Crater Lake

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in Oregon. That translates into about five and a half football fields. I am not sure why, but that statistic was just stunning to me. Lake Tahoe trails only the Great Lakes in total volume, making it one of the deepest and largest lakes in the United States. If you take a boat out to the middle of the lake, the fresh mountain water is so clear that it can feel a little bit like the lake is bottomless—it just keeps going and going and going. Whether you are standing on the shore or looking down into the seemingly endless clear-blue water from a boat, the lake seems never-ending, vast, and bottomless.

Standing on the shore, I was reminded of the prophet Habakkuk's words to God's people: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). He writes these words as God's people are questioning God's use of Assyria and Babylon to bring his judgment upon them. Their kingdom is in shambles, they are practicing idolatry and wickedness, and they are wondering: *What are God's purposes in the world? Can this really be it? Is exile going to be our final destiny? Where is all of this heading?* What is the goal—the *telos* of the world?

This is the prophet's answer: *One day the whole earth, every single part of it—the sky, the mountains, the rivers, the canyons, all creatures, and all peoples—will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.* Not only will the knowledge of the glory of the Lord fill them, but it will fill them as the waters cover the sea. The bottomless, infinite, and boundless God

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will cover all of his creation. The infinite beauty of God's presence will cover everything.

This is a stunning picture of where world history is heading. In the middle of their darkest moment, a moment of judgment, the prophet reminds God's people that all of world history is heading toward the kingdom and the presence of God. This is the future of God's world—it is our future. Their greatest hope, endless enjoyment of the presence of God, would one day be a reality.

The *Why* behind the *What*

Before we get into ministry philosophies, programs, and best practices, we need to remind ourselves of the why behind the what—the glory of God. The main aim of this book, the call to deep discipleship in our churches, is for the sole purpose of pointing ourselves and those we lead toward the infinite beauty of the Triune God. Success in ministry is not found in building programs but in building disciples—disciples who love God with all of their heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luke 10:27). Christ is the goal, not better or more impressive ministries. He is what we want.

The prophet Habakkuk is pointing us toward a future day when God's infinite glory will cover everything. He is showing us that the knowledge of the glory of the Lord is the goal of deep discipleship. It is the goal, because this is the future to

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which all world history is pointing. But the knowledge of the glory of the Lord is also the fuel of deep discipleship. It is the fuel because his presence alone is going to get us there.

I am not just advocating for a specific ministry practice. I am saying that our greatest desire in ministry is the presence of God. Specifically, in the local church we are motivated by this vision of the beauty of God. His presence is what we want. Ministry does not satisfy; God does. We want him now, we want him in the future, and his presence with us is the only way we are going to get there. Our ministry aim is to ask God to bring us into his inexhaustible presence, bottomless beauty, and infinite glory. Fellowship with the Triune God is where we are going, and fellowship with the Triune God is how we are going to get there.

God's desire is that one day the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover every square inch of his creation. God is working to bring a knowledge of himself to all of creation, and his followers want in on that now. If we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God's purpose is eventually to cover all of creation with his glorious presence, then our instinct should be to get in on that now. Whole disciples of Jesus say, "If you are bringing your presence to this world, start with me, and start now." That is the instinct of deep disciples. We don't want to wait for tomorrow for the knowledge of God's glory to transform us. Discipleship is for today, not just for the future. We need disciples and local churches who not only look forward

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with eager anticipation to a future in the presence of God but who also want to be covered with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord today—now. Even though it may not look like it at times, this is the path the world is on, and disciples are already on that journey.

In order for the church to grow and develop a vision of deep discipleship, we have to start with the why behind the what. If we begin this book by talking about the what—programs, curriculum, and a philosophy of ministry—before we talk about the why—God himself—then it will be a complete waste of time. Ministry that is not oriented to the presence of God is dead. The why behind the what of deep discipleship is God. Why does deep discipleship matter? Because God matters. Nothing is more beautiful, lovely, pure, and limitless than God alone. Herman Bavinck gets it exactly right when he says, “God, and God alone, is man’s highest good.”¹

I believe the greatest opportunity for the contemporary church is to recapture a radically God-centered vision for discipleship. Deep discipleship is more about reveling in the transcendence of God than it is a ministry practice. The source of true discipleship is not better programs, better preaching, or better community. All of those, and more, are hugely important tools, but the source of discipleship is God himself. Thus,

¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2020), 1.

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at the heart of everything we do is the desire to grow in our love and knowledge of God.

We are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37). The Great Commandment actually repeats “with all” over and over again to remind us that nothing is worthy of our whole self but God alone. Discipleship, then, is about a redirection of our loves to the One who is lovely. The next curriculum, the next conference, or the next community group will only help you grow deeper in your relationship with Christ insofar as it attempts to reorient your love toward the Triune God. The opportunity in front of you, your ministry, or your church, is to retrieve the Bible’s vision for the beauty and the centrality of God in all things. The invitation to deep discipleship is the invitation no longer to live with the next fifty years in view, but the next fifty trillion, and to aim our whole selves, our churches, and our ministries toward the kingdom of God.

In John 17:3 Jesus prays for his disciples to have eternal life: “And this is eternal life,” he says, “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Jesus is always teaching his disciples that all of life is centered on growing in our love and knowledge of God. John Calvin noted, “The final goal of the blessed life rests in the knowledge of God.”² This is the vision Habakkuk gave us—that all of cre-

² John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 51.

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ation is moving toward an awareness of God in all things. If we give people better ministry programs but fail to give them a radically God-centered vision for their lives, then we have failed miserably. In other words, the primary pathway of discipleship is not a curriculum, and it can't be programmed. The primary pathway of discipleship is God himself. God is the goal of deep discipleship.

When thought of this way, discipleship is not just a program but a total reorientation to reality. We begin to see who God truly is, who we are, what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world. In being reoriented to reality, disciples begin to view everything through a God-centered lens.

The opportunity in front of the church is not primarily found in better programs, better preaching, or a better philosophy of ministry. All of these are important, and the church should strive to be excellent in these things, but without a radically God-centered vision of all things, it does not matter how good at ministry we are. We cannot forget this. Great ministry practice that is not fueled by a great God is the greatest tragedy. The opportunity in front of us is to reorient ourselves and our churches to a God-centered vision of all things. We won't make any genuine progress in ministry that is not fueled by the presence of God. God is working in the world to accomplish his purposes of bringing about the knowledge of his glory to his entire creation, and the church's role is to align herself with the purposes of God.

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It is important to point out at the beginning of a book about discipleship that will hopefully be read by ministry leaders and growing disciples that it does not matter how good our ministry plans are if they are not reorienting people to set their eyes on the God of the Bible. Deep discipleship is not simply a result of following a specific philosophy of ministry. If it were, discipleship would be so much easier. If all we had to do was write a curriculum, create a program, or cast vision for new ministry initiatives, most of our churches and disciples would be much healthier because we've gotten pretty good at those things. Programs, studies, and ministry initiatives are great, but they are not the fuel, or even the goal, of deep discipleship. Sure, we may be able to use these things efficiently and effectively to make disciples, but the question is: *Disciples of what?* Without the proper goal and fuel of discipleship, churches may have the most impressive ministries in the world, and they may be able to churn out disciples, but these won't be disciples of Jesus.

There is no silver bullet or perfect ministry paradigm that creates deep disciples. We should pursue excellence in all of these areas. However, if our primary focus is our own ministries, not God, then we will never make deep disciples.

We can't measure discipleship by how many people are in small groups, or how many are in our classes, or how many Bible studies they have completed. True discipleship can only be measured by a disciple's ability to connect all of reality to the

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Triune God. When we think about discipleship, we are thinking about our ability to be reoriented to God, and we begin to see that God initiates discipleship, that God is the source of discipleship, and that God is the goal of discipleship.

Two Challenges to Deep Discipleship

There are many challenges that our churches face as we try to align ourselves, our churches, and our philosophy of ministry toward a vision of deep discipleship—too many challenges to highlight here. But I would like to highlight two acute challenges I think are more common than some of the others. What makes these challenges unique is that they often do not look like challenges but, instead, look like real discipleship. In other words, if we are not aware of these two challenges, we could be leading people into danger without even knowing it. These two challenges can be summed up as discipleship that leads to autonomy or apathy. If our churches want to make deep disciples, then we must be aware of how serious these ideas are and how to help our people navigate through them.

Self-Centered Discipleship

One of the greatest challenges facing the church is discipleship that centers on the autonomous self. The West is in the middle of a cultural moment that centers all of reality

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on the autonomous self. People's interest in spirituality is not waning, but the kind of spirituality people are increasingly interested in is a spirituality that is focused on the self. Bavinck's claim that "God, and God alone, is man's highest good," could be contrasted by a contemporary cultural mantra: "Self, and being true to yourself alone, is your highest good." We have replaced the transcendence of God with the transcendence of self.

Though this problem is uniquely clear in our cultural moment, it is not a new problem. Ever since Genesis 3 humans have viewed the love and knowledge of self as our highest good, falsely believing that the self, not God, is a bottomless well of beauty. Salvation, according to self-centered discipleship, is not found in knowing God but in knowing self. We are being told everywhere that truly finding ourselves is the antidote to our stress, anxiety, and confusion, but biblical discipleship says knowledge of God is the only true antidote.

In this turn toward the self, the church has, perhaps both intentionally and unintentionally, tailored its discipleship strategies to accommodate, and even perpetuate, this cultural shift. In other words, it is not just the secularist promise that salvation is found in self-improvement, self-actualization, and self-growth, but this is slowly becoming the promise in the church as well. In his book *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, David Wells comments on the disappearance of a God-centered vision for discipleship and the

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appearance of self-centered discipleship when he says that we can see “the shift from God to the self as the central focus of faith.”³ He goes on to highlight how this theological shift has led to a serious confusion about who God is, what discipleship is, and what the church’s role is.

In Matthew 16, Jesus confronts this view of discipleship as self-improvement. At the core of the chapter is the incredible scene at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). In verse 14, Jesus’ disciples respond by saying, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Persisting, Jesus continues his question by asking them, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). In his famous response, Simon Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Jesus responds to his disciples by saying, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v. 17).

I have heard it preached dozens of times that the question, “But who do you say that I am?” is the most important question anyone will ever answer—and for good reason. The identity of Jesus stands at the center of the Christian faith, but I want to suggest there is an equally important question. Jesus is not only interested in his disciples knowing who he is; Peter

³ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 95.

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gets that part right. They must also know what he came to do and what is going to be required for them to follow him.

Jesus' identity can never be separated from his work, and our identity can never be separated from our call to follow.

Immediately after this scene the text tells us that "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matt. 16:21). Peter, the same Peter who just got the identity of Jesus right, responds by rebuking Jesus. You see, for Peter, true human flourishing and true life are found in self-actualization, preservation, and improvement. He has just rightly answered that Jesus is the King, which is really good news for Peter. He is going to reign and rule with King Jesus! But it is going to look nothing like what Peter thought. How could the Christ, the King who came to rule, die on a cross? After all, Peter got into this whole discipleship thing because he thought Jesus was going to rule on a throne, and if Jesus was going to rule on a throne, then that meant Peter was going to rule as well. This is discipleship as self-improvement.

Jesus envisions discipleship differently than Peter does. If Jesus dies on a cross, and if Peter must follow him there, then that is going to get in the way of Peter's self-actualization. This is not who Peter wants to be—following Jesus to a cross is not "being true to himself." He wants to rule with Jesus in the kingdom; what does a cross have to do with that?

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Peter has a view of the self that is consistent not only with the secular narratives of our day but with the human narrative that begins in Genesis 3—the narrative that tells us we are to grasp for an identity apart from God. Jesus confronts this false narrative by telling Peter and the rest of the disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:24–25).

According to Jesus, discipleship is not about self-actualization or self-preservation; it is about self-denial. You will know yourself the most when you are carrying your cross. All of our self-actualized visions of discipleship and our own little kingdoms need to crumble and be crucified if the kingdom of God is going to reign in our lives. True self-knowledge comes not through being true to yourself but through denying yourself.

When we make discipleship about self-actualization, not self-denial, we fail to embody the way of the cross that Jesus beckons his followers to imitate. Discipleship is not the pursuit of self that transforms our view of God; the pursuit of God transforms the self—our whole selves. Matthew 16 shows us that the person of Christ cannot be separated from the work of Christ. It also shows us that the way to follow the person of Christ is to carry the cross of self-denial, not the crown of self-improvement. “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’

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sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). Disciples are learning how to slowly take their eyes off of themselves as they become more and more transfixed on Christ.

So, what does it look like on the ground when we succumb to the lie that discipleship is about being true to yourself? This is when our churches and ministries begin to offer people what they want instead of what they need. This is when disciples have a greater, more exhaustive knowledge of their Enneagram number than the attributes of God. This is when disciples are more inclined to read generic spirituality books than the Gospels. This is when disciples don’t have a firsthand knowledge of their sacred text, or basic Christian beliefs, but have exhaustive knowledge of politics, sports, or entertainment. It is when disciples are more shaped by the practices and habits of digital secularism than basic spiritual disciplines.

So, how do we untangle ourselves and our churches from the pervasiveness of self-centered discipleship? We all need to be reoriented to who God is and who we are. Our local churches need to completely orient themselves toward the character and nature of God. Self-denial only makes sense if we get God instead of ourselves.

One of the most quoted lines in the history of theology is from John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. At the beginning of this masterful work, he says, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two

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parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.²⁴ Discipleship is being reoriented to who God is and who we are. That God is the Creator, and we are his creation. That he is perfect, and we are both beautiful as image-bearers and broken as sinners. That he is the Redeemer, and we are in need of redemption. However, many people take this quote from Calvin and apply it in a way that he never intended. Over and over I hear people use this line as a means to justify discipleship as the means to self-improvement. Calvin is not trying to get us to turn our attention to ourselves but to God, so that we can see our desperate need of him.

I can still remember the first time I went shopping for a diamond engagement ring. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. The jeweler made me feel like I needed to have a master's degree in jewelry to understand how to buy a diamond. As the jeweler was explaining cut, color, clarity, and carat, I began to look through their collection. I was shopping on the budget of a college senior, which means things were a little tight. The diamond I was looking at honestly did not seem very impressive—especially for the price tag that came with it. Then the jeweler took out of the case with tweezers, placed it against a black backdrop, and gave me a magnifying lens to look at the diamond. Suddenly, the beauty and perfections that were inherently true of the diamond became evident to me. What

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:35.

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I could not see with my natural eyes all of a sudden became gloriously evident.

In other words, Calvin is not saying there are two diamonds worth studying, knowing, and magnifying: God and self. He is saying there is one diamond—God, and God alone—worth magnifying, and one black backdrop—self. Our job is to magnify God, not self.

Deep disciples are growing in their awareness that they are not a second diamond to look at through the magnifying glass. Instead, we are the black backdrop that shows how beautiful the true diamond is. As humans, our instinct is to magnify how great we are, but as followers of Christ, we are learning to proclaim, “Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!” (Ps. 34:3). Christianity is not a religion of self-improvement; it is a discipleship program of self-denial. The way of Jesus is an apprenticeship toward self-forgetfulness—a growing understanding that we are the creation and that God is the Creator.

Deep discipleship, more than a philosophy of ministry, is really about helping your church reenvision the good life. Our people are being sold all kinds of visions of the good life. They are being constantly formed through books, media, and podcasts into their image of the good life. The Christian faith says that the good life starts and ends with God. It starts and ends with the idea that nothing is better than God and that he has given himself to us in Christ and in the gospel. Our churches

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cannot settle for Christianized versions of cultural discipleship, self-actualization, or self-improvement when we can have God instead. At the center of deep discipleship is the refrain that we want more of God and less of ourselves. We ourselves, and those we lead, must agree with John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). This is what Jesus was trying to teach Peter at Caesarea Phillipi. Discipleship is not a path to autonomous self-improvement that leads to a throne; it is a path of self-denial that leads to a cross.

Spiritual Apathy

The second major challenge our churches will face is the kind of discipleship or ministry programming that caters to spiritual apathy. We cannot settle for a kind of discipleship that lets people settle into boredom with Jesus as long as they are not bored with the church. In the church we are more concerned with apostasy than we are with apathy, but both are deadly to a vibrant walk with Christ. If our excellence in ministry is keeping people’s attention rather than the beauty of Jesus, then we have failed. Becoming bored with the true Christ is impossible.

One of the reasons our people have grown bored with Jesus is that many church leaders have as well. We have settled for a cultural Christianity that is anemic and will not sustain disciples of Jesus.

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The message of cultural Christianity is that God is merely good to us. The message of biblical Christianity is that God is *good for us*. The message of cultural Christianity is that we should seek God's goods. The message of biblical Christianity is that we should *seek God's goodness*. The message of cultural Christianity is that we should seek God so that he might provide for us. The message of biblical Christianity is that *God is our provision*. The message of cultural Christianity is that we should seek God in order to get things. The message of biblical Christianity is that we should *seek God to get the highest thing—namely himself*.

Do you see the enormous difference between those two theologies? The message of cultural Christianity and deep, biblical, holistic discipleship are at odds and cannot be reconciled. One of my greatest fears as a pastor is the idea that people may be satisfied with church but bored with Jesus. It terrifies me that people may enjoy the sermon, participate in small group ministry, volunteer on one of our many teams, and be completely satisfied by their experience—yet be spiritually apathetic toward the person and work of Christ.

These two competing visions have real-life implications for the life of discipleship in the local church. Discipleship is fueled by our beliefs about who God is. The message of cultural Christianity and the message of biblical Christianity are deeply at odds, but unfortunately, the message of cultural Christianity is what is forming the majority of the people in our churches.

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Something like this was happening in the Colossian church. They were, by all metrics, a relatively healthy church. Paul begins his letter by expressing his gratitude for them (Col. 1:3). He encourages them to continue to grow in spiritual fruit (vv. 9–12), and he reminds them of the basic truths of the gospel (vv. 13–14). But then he turns his attention to the person and work of Christ (vv. 15–23). He does this because the Colossian church was growing apathetic toward Christ. They were not apathetic about ministry or church, but they were growing more interested in those other spiritual things than in Jesus. Apathy toward Christ but not toward ministry is a dangerous place to be. In the Colossian church there were people who were growing in their interest in spiritual things like angels, demons, and spiritual powers. There was another group of people who were interested in visible dominions, politics, and rulers. These people were elevating these visible and invisible created realities to the level of Christ. That is why Paul reminds them of who Jesus is—the image of the invisible God—and what he has done—created all things, visible and invisible. This is exactly what Paul says to a church that is apathetic toward Christ but is still spiritually hungry:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created

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through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (Col. 1:15–18)

Paul is trying to remind them that everything is about Jesus. It is entirely possible for a church to have a healthy budget, dynamic worship, relevant preaching, contemporary leadership principles, and a thriving family ministry, and still be in danger of failing in its primary mission of making disciples of Christ. He is correcting their apathy toward Christ by reminding them of Christ's preeminence. He is gently reminding the local church that if we are known for anything other than the preeminence of Christ in all things, then we have failed. When we grow apathetic, we will find spiritual substitutes for our ministries, but Paul is saying that apathy is corrected when we remind ourselves of the preeminence of Christ.

We are living in a cultural moment where apostasy from Christ is a real threat. It's entirely possible, and maybe even likely, that many people who once professed Christ will walk away from him. Apostasy is a real danger to the church, but apathy is equally dangerous. This produces a Christianity that elevates visible and invisible realities above the life of discipleship.

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This looks like Jesus and politics, Jesus and business, Jesus and sports, Jesus and fitness, Jesus and finances, Jesus and spiritual warfare, Jesus and coffee, Jesus and community, Jesus and other forms of spirituality. Anytime we elevate created things—visible or invisible—we aren't elevating them to Christ; we are bringing Christ down to them. We are not giving him the honor and glory that is due to him alone.

A domesticated Jesus will never produce deep disciples; a domesticated Jesus is not worth following. The best medicine for a church that has grown apathetic is to introduce them to the awesomeness of Christ, which is exactly what Paul is trying to do for the Colossian church: “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Never lose your awe of who Christ is, what he has done, what he is doing, and what he promises to do in the future. He is the image of the invisible God; he is the Creator of all things; he is the Alpha and the Omega; he sustains all things. He is the head of the church; he is the resurrection and the life; he is God Almighty.

Discipleship is learning about Christ's supremacy over all things. It is truly companionship with Jesus through all of life.⁵ A scheme of the devil is to get people to renounce their faith in Christ, but another scheme of the devil is for people simply to grow bored with Christ. Satan will do anything he can to get

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 60.

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you to take your eyes off Christ. He knows that you, or your church, do not have to renounce Jesus to cease to be useful in God's kingdom; you just have to grow bored with him.

Deep discipleship is radically committed to a God-centered, a Christ-centered, vision of all things. One of the greatest mistakes we will make as we seek to grow in our own walk with Christ, and as we seek to help others deepen their faith, is that we will try to give people more than Jesus. True discipleship is not more *than* Jesus, but more *of* Jesus. Ministry is only worth doing if Christ is the One who gets all the glory.

The invitation to deep discipleship in the local church is the invitation to enjoy the infinite God—to invite him to cover his church with the knowledge of his glory, as the waters cover the sea. J. I. Packer asks these important questions of discipleship: *What are we made for? What aim should we set ourselves in life?* To both he answers: to know God.⁶ He is absolutely right, and if we believe that, we also need to ask this question: *How can we structure our churches and ministries to help people toward that end?*

If God is who he says he is, then nothing is more valuable than deep discipleship. Everyone is a disciple of something, but only the Triune God invites us into deep, holistic, never-ending fellowship. One of my greatest hopes in this book, far

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 33.

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beyond a philosophy of ministry, is that our churches will be reminded of who God is. He is more beautiful than we can ever imagine. Discipleship that is geared toward self-improvement or that caters to spiritual apathy evaporates when we see him for who he is.

If we do not adopt discipleship strategies in the local church with the sole intent of inviting people into the depths of beauty that can only be found in the Triune God, then our disease will only get worse. The heartbeat of deep discipleship is to see our churches, sermons, groups, studies, and kids ministries once again captivated by the beauty of the Triune God above all else. The foundation of deep discipleship is the glorious truth that God doesn't just give us ideas, plans, and ministry philosophies for churches; he gives us himself. God is the goal of deep discipleship, and God is the means of deep discipleship. He is where we are going, and he is how we will get there. Whether we are standing on the shore, just beginning our discipleship journey, or hoping to swim into the depths of Christian maturity, we know we want more. Not more *than* Jesus, but more *of* Jesus. We want more of him because he is not just good to us; most important, he is good for us.

Discipleship should be deep because God is inexhaustible. He invites his church into rich and deep fellowship because his goodness is indeed bottomless, and you can never exhaust the bottomless beauty of God. Along with Paul we proclaim, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

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How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33). The invitation to deep, holistic discipleship is first and foremost an invitation to see God for who he is, our highest good.

Main Ideas

1. God's desire is that one day the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover every square inch of his creation. That is the main aim of deep discipleship—to point ourselves and those we lead toward the knowledge of the infinite beauty of God.
2. Discipleship is not just a program but a total reorientation to reality. We begin to see who God truly is, who we are, and what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world.
3. There are two main challenges to deep discipleship: self-centered discipleship and spiritual apathy. In the former, salvation is not found in knowing God but in knowing and being true to self. In the latter, we settle for a kind of discipleship that lets people settle into boredom with Jesus as long as they are not bored with the church.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is a God-centered vision for discipleship different from other paradigms?
2. If you were to take an honest inventory of your church, would you say that your discipleship operates within a God-centered vision, or some other (man-centered, entertainment-centered, morality-centered, etc.) vision?

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3. Have you faced either or both of the two main challenges to discipleship in your church? If so, how have you responded to them?

To-Do List

1. Read Habakkuk 2:14. Spend some time praying that your church would be “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” Ask God to show you what must change in your church for this to be a reality.

2. Take stock of the different programs and ministries in your church. How many would you say are operating with a God-centered vision of discipleship?

3. Identify which main challenge to discipleship is a greater threat to your church. Pray for God’s help against this challenge, and begin brainstorming some ways you can lovingly and graciously correct and redirect this posture.