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How to Organize Discipleship Training - Part 1
Grasping the Big Picture

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The State of Discipleship Training in America

Tragically, the state of discipleship training in American churches is frightfully dismaying. Let me break it down for you just a little.

According to George Barna's latest study, while 51% of Americans say they believe in the God of the Bible, only 6% of the population actually holds a biblical worldview. What that means is that most self-identified Christians don't fully understand God the way he is revealed in the Bible. As bad as that is, there is even worse news. Only:

- 21% of those who attend an evangelical Protestant church hold a biblical worldview,
- 16% of those who attend a Pentecostal or Charismatic church hold a biblical worldview,
- 8% of those who attend a mainline Protestant church hold a biblical worldview, and
- 1% of those who attend a Roman Catholic church hold a biblical worldview.

So it's not just the general population that holds a non-biblical view of God, it is the large majority of self-identified Christians, as well.

As we look at all of the turmoil we see in American society today, it is abundantly clear where the problem lies. Our society was built upon a biblical worldview. The very foundation of morality as it is expressed in the family, the media, education, arts and entertainment, the government, business, and religion, was premised on biblical values. Now, however, an entirely different set of values dominates society – and the conflict be-

tween America's traditional values and these new ones are ripping the fabric of society apart.

Of course, as Christians see this happening, we need to be concerned, and even politically and socially active to push back against the evil usurper. However, political and social action will not solve this problem. It might put the proverbial "finger in the dike" to temporarily slow down the disaster, but it will not solve the problem. The problem is a spiritual one that can only be solved by spiritual means. It has been caused by massive numbers of Americans turning away from God, and will only be solved by massive numbers of people turning back to God.

This is the first in a series of articles designed to expose the problem and offer a solution for pastors and churches that want to do something significant and meaningful to turn the tide. We will begin in this article with an overview of the problem. We will then continue forward in future articles with specific thoughts about how to address it.

The Place of the Church

There are a couple of obstacles we run into when dealing with the topic of discipleship training. One problem has to do with figuring out how to best incorporate it into a local church body. A second problem relates to what should be included in the training.

How to Best Incorporate Discipleship Training into a Local Church Body

Before we can actually begin to implement some kind strategy, we have to first decide whether or not it is

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even something that is important enough to emphasize as a part of a church's programming.

The vast majority of churches have special programming for worship and Bible study, but specialized discipleship training to get at the knowledge and skills necessary to help believers become more devoted followers of Christ doesn't fit well into the schedule of most churches. I firmly believe that pastors, generally speaking, actually do sense the need for this kind of training, but find it difficult to get people to be willing to put in the time and effort it takes to do it. And since it is difficult to get participation, they do the best they can to incorporate it into the Bible study and worship programs.

This can, of course, be done to a certain extent. But it is almost impossible, using that kind of strategy, to get the kind of in-depth, consistent training that is needed to equip people with the knowledge and skills necessary to take their faith life to the next level. There needs to be a way to incorporate in-depth discipleship training into the church.

In Ephesians 4:11-13, the apostle Paul expresses the thought that the primary work of church leaders is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry." In the hyper-pluralistic world that American society has become, this task is more important than ever. In a societal environment where non-Christian beliefs dominate (which is what we now have), many Christians struggle with having absolute confidence that their Christian faith is even true. But even for those who get past that struggle, most:

- don't understand the people who believe differently,
- don't know how to effectively express their faith in the world, and

- don't know how to share their faith in a way that makes sense to the majority of non-believers.

It is quite possible to have a vibrant and thriving church organization, yet not be effective in equipping the believers in the church to be capable and devoted disciples of Christ in the world – and many churches are in that boat.

The circumstances of every church are different, so there is no single program or approach that will work for every church. This reminds me of what happened when Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, came out in 1995. His church in California was growing massively, and pastors all over the country, even the world, wanted to copy what he was doing. So he wrote his book and shared his story. The problem that emerged, though, was that people attempted to copy his methodology, but didn't take to heart the central message of the book. So new "purpose driven" churches began popping up everywhere, and already established churches began trying to change the way they did church to copy Warren. Years later, church analysts followed up on that phenomenon and found that a very large percentage of those attempts failed. They didn't produce the kind of results that Warren had achieved.

The problem was, though, his methodology was not the key to his church's growth. It was, rather, the concept of "purpose driven" itself. Every church culture, and the society that every church is planted into, is unique unto itself. Trying to take a methodology that works in one place and simply transplanting it wholesale into another place is a recipe for failure. The only time that works is when the demographics are pretty much the same as the original model – which is rarely the case.

By the same token, no single discipleship training methodology will work for every church. Each one must assess

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its own situation and figure out how to make it fit into their church culture.

What Needs to Be Included in a Church's Discipleship Training

There are a lot of topics that can potentially be taught to believers to help them in their quest to become more faithful disciples of Christ. These topics relate to the various passions and gifting of individual believers, as well as to the core beliefs of the Christian faith itself. They are topics that people need to master in order to effectively live out the calling that God has placed on their lives.

We need to realize, however, that not every topic is universally important. Some of the topics specifically relate to the work of subsets of believers who carry out their calling in specialized areas.

But there is a set of topics that is universally important. These are things that EVERY Christian needs to, at the very least, be familiar with. They are the things that form the underlying foundation of the calling to be a Christian, itself.

As we work through this series of articles, we will dive specifically into the various topics that fit into this latter category. For now, though, it is sufficient to simply lay them out so that we can see the big picture of Christian discipleship essentials. Following are the foundational basics that EVERY Christian should learn.

1. Understand Worldview Concepts
 - What is worldview and what are the worldview possibilities?
 - What are the elements of unity and diversity that make up a biblical worldview?
2. Study the Essentials of a Biblical Worldview
 - What is the Christian worldview?

- How do worldview beliefs affect our Christian witness? (gospel message and apologetics)
- How do worldview beliefs affect our daily faith life?

3. Learn How to Recognize the Way Worldview Beliefs Are Expressed in Society (specifically in the following areas.)

- Family
- Media
- Education
- Arts & Entertainment
- Government
- Politics
- Business
- Religion

4. Develop the Skills Needed to Take the Christian Faith into Society

- Witness
- Apologetics

Pulling it All Together

Becoming a faithful disciple of Christ is ultimately an individual matter. Each person must make the decisions, acquire the knowledge and skills, and personally live out their life in a way that is consistent with what is revealed in the Bible. However, the church body does have a part to play in encouraging and helping individuals along that journey.

The truth is, generally speaking, the Christian faith in America is currently in a horrible state. And the only possibility for fixing this problem is for the church to step up. But in order for the church to do that, it is necessary for believers in the churches to seriously and intentionally begin to prioritize discipleship training. The problems that exist are spiritual problems – problems that lie in the hearts and minds of the masses in American society. The only solution, then, is a spiritual solution – a massive work of God to transform the hearts and minds of those who don't know Christ.

Only God can change a person's heart, but he has called and commissioned all believers to partner with him to share the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Equipping believers to be faithful to that task needs to be a priority for every church.

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