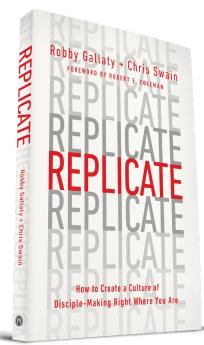


### **BOOK EXCERPT**



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# How to Lose Seven Million People

Most of us have become quite good at the church thing. And yet, disciples are the only thing that Jesus cares about, and it's the only number that Jesus is counting.

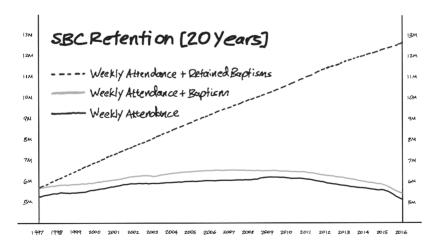
• MIKE BREEN AND THE 3DM TEAM, BUILDING A DISCIPLING CULTURE

How do you lose seven million people?

That was the question the world's largest protestant denomination, Southern Baptists, asked themselves at their annual convention in 2018. After two years of leading a team of pastors and ministry leaders who made up a disciple-making task force, I (Robby) couldn't believe our findings. As shocking as it is, you may have noticed a similar trend in your church regardless of denominational affiliation. Before we can formulate a plan of action, we must face reality. Facts are our friends, but we have to decide whether we are going to ignore them, reject them, or accept them.

We discovered the missing seven million people near the end of our evaluation. After examining a report that compared baptisms to church attendance numbers over twenty years (see the chart below), we discovered something as astounding as it was heartbreaking. In 1996, 5,224,000 people attended a worship service at an SBC church. Over the next twenty years, roughly forty-six thousand churches baptized seven million people. One would expect church attendance to grow by roughly the same amount. You could rationally reduce the number by about three million after you factor in mortality rate and family transitions. Did the weekly attendance of churchgoing people increase to eight or nine million? Not even close.

Shockingly, rather than adding people to the fold, SBC churches declined. Weekly attendance dropped by twenty-four thousand people. Before you think we're throwing stones at the Southern Baptist Convention, please know: we merely want to sound the alarm. It's time we stop pretending there isn't a problem in churches today. While we are reaching people, we are struggling to keep them in church.



#### 24

The diagram above offers insight into SBC churches; however, trends suggest this is not an issue isolated to Southern Baptists alone. The weekly attendance, if those that were baptized were retained during these years (represented by the dotted line), would have yielded exponential growth. Churches have been celebrating baptisms but have been ineffective at retaining new converts or new guests. Attendees and members are streaming out the back doors as fast they come into the front doors—and often even quicker. While retention will never be one hundred percent, something is drastically wrong when the church is not retaining those who have made decisions to follow Christ.

Baptisms shouldn't be minimized or glossed over. We should celebrate every single time a person steps out in baptism and shows the body of Christ outwardly what God is doing inwardly. However, baptism is not the finish line of a relationship with Christ. It's the starting line of a lifelong journey toward God.

The primary challenge to lackluster commitment to church attendance is the changing culture of our day. Thirty years ago, Americans who self-identified as Christians went to church on Sunday mornings. I remember my parents waking me up every week for service. Although both were unbelievers at the time, we rarely missed church. Those days are long gone. Generis, a church consulting company, surveyed churchgoers to determine how often they attend monthly. In the year 2000, the average church member made it to church 3.2 times a month.<sup>1</sup> Just seventeen years later, that number dropped to 1.8 times. Unfortunately, this trend is expected to continue in the future.

Results like these can be heartbreaking and hopeful at the same time. People who identify as members of your church likely only attend about half the time—half as often as they did two decades ago. But this means pastors who thought their church was declining may actually be plateaued or stable since the same people come less often.

Even so, what's the solution for steering away from this inevitable cliff? Discipleship. By encouraging believers to pursue discipling relationships that are accountable, meaningful, and transparent, our churches will see fewer people leave and more people stay and serve. Taking a look back at the early church will help us understand how this can happen.

The first-century church was founded on relationships that moved people beyond conversion into community. In Acts 2, the disciples were scrambling to connect baptized believers into discipling relationships that would continue after they exited the baptismal pools outside the temple. <u>Contrary to what we</u> see today in many churches, where salvation is essential and discipleship is optional, the first-century Christians took Jesus' commission seriously.

The apostles followed the pattern they'd watched Jesus demonstrate in the years before His death and resurrection. What they'd seen Him do, they now attempted to emulate knowing that's what He expected from them. We know Jesus' method of making disciples worked because we are disciples today as a result of His disciples following His example. We must compare our current disciple-making practices against His model for ministry.

We can do this by evaluating our current context. Every ministry leader\* must ask themselves and those they lead two questions:

<sup>\*</sup> While this book is focused on helping every disciple of Jesus make disciples, some content will focus on church and ministry leadership in order to help in that context.

- 1) Do we have a process for making disciples—moving new believers toward biblical maturity in Christ?
- 2) Is it working?

Your answers to these questions will help you diagnose the state of your disciple-making process (or lack thereof). You may find you have a process to grow attendance, build membership, and generate decisions without a specific plan to disciple your people. And even if you do have a process for making disciples, you may find it is not working the way you hoped it would. As we examine the problem with disciple-making over the next few chapters, ask yourself the questions above.

We can't go back and reconnect the millions of people we've lost, but we can change our model to impact the millions to come more effectively. I pray that our churches will embrace a model of making disciples that Jesus demonstrated for the church. I pray that as you read this book, you will learn from our mistakes and successes as you make key adjustments to become a healthy church.

# 2

## The Dangerous Half-Gospel

When 96 percent of your disciples have been taught not to make disciples, you reap what you have sown.

• BILL HULL AND BRANDON COOK, THE COST OF CHEAP GRACE

Why do we find ourselves in a discipleship deficit? Perhaps because we've been preaching half the gospel. Since the advent of mass evangelism, with preachers such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Graham, becoming a Christian has been viewed by some as praying a prayer or walking an aisle. As long as I say the right words the correct way, I'm good with God. What I do for God from that point on is optional. Bill Hull, in his book *Conversion and Discipleship*, devotes an entire chapter to getting the gospel right. He states, "People profess to be Christians yet believe they do not need to follow Jesus. We've defined discipleship as optional, a choice and not a demand."<sup>2</sup> Jesus didn't just save us *from* sin; He saved us *for* something.

If the purpose of Christianity is only to gain eternal life, Jesus wouldn't have left us on earth after He saved us. We'd be raptured immediately because we found the purpose of our existence. Surely the purpose of the kingdom of heaven is greater than simply achieving eternal life. Jesus gave us a commission to make reproducible followers of Him. <u>It's called the Great Co-Mission for a reason: God expects our involvement</u>. The reason He didn't usher us into paradise the moment we were born again is because there's work to be done. We were saved not just from the world, but for the world.

Most evangelistic tactics move people toward making a decision or a convert; however, Jesus and His disciples focused on making disciples. A decision to follow Christ is necessary to go from death to life, but it doesn't end there; you must also *follow Christ*. As my friend Derwin Gray, pastor of Transformation Church, said to me recently, "The apostle Paul wouldn't understand the invitations issued after services today." Raise a hand, walk an aisle, say a prayer, and "repeat after me" would have been foreign concepts to the apostle.

Sadly, we have reduced salvation to a transaction. If sinners provide the correct answers to a mental, spiritual questionnaire and say "Amen" at the right spots, we declare they are saved with nothing else required of them. Whether they follow Jesus after saying this prayer is optional. Whether they enjoy the blessings of the kingdom is up to them. Whether they replicate their lives into the lives of others is a choice—and frequently, the choice is "no." Salvation in Christ comes through a simple prayer to follow Jesus, but it doesn't end there. Jesus expects so much more; He commands so much more.

In a decision-centered model, spiritual disciplines in the Christian life become nothing but recommended activities. Obedience, reading the Bible, memorizing Scripture, and sharing the gospel are optional. Praying and fasting are optional as well. This can't be what Jesus envisioned when He commanded

His followers to "make disciples of all nations." The longer we perpetuate this form of Christianity, the longer people will remain comfortable as consumers and not coworkers in the gospel.

### **CONSUMERS VS. COWORKERS**

Every church has two types of people: consumers and coworkers. Our goal as leaders and disciple-makers is to move people from the first category to the second.

A consumer is a spectator. A coworker is a participant.

A consumer shows up late to the service. A coworker arrives early to help.

- A consumer criticizes everything that doesn't line up with his or her preferences.
- A coworker appreciates what God is doing in the church.

A consumer comes to sit and get. A coworker looks to go and serve.

A consumer asks: "What's in it for me?" A coworker asks: "What's in it for you?"

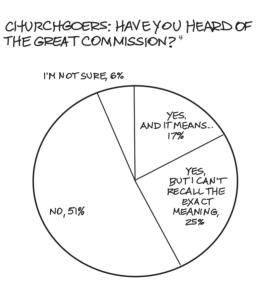
A consumer only takes in for themselves. A coworker pours out to others.

A consumer sees himself as a cistern to store truth. A coworker sees himself as a channel to bestow blessing.

#### 31

Sadly, most Christians feel inadequate to be contributors instead of bystanders. It's not entirely their fault. Every one of us is the byproduct of centuries of Christian tradition where clergy performed all the ministry duties separate and apart from church members. Modern statistics prove the confusion over making disciples today.

One poll found that a staggering 51% of churchgoers said they had "never heard of the Great Commission,"<sup>3</sup> and 25% of those polled can recall hearing the words but don't know the meaning. Only 17% knew what the Great Commission actually was. Herein lies the problem.



Eighty-three percent of church attendees are clueless about the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. In a society with more access to information than ever before, we have ignored the final words of Jesus. As a result, people sit by idly while "trained, certified" priests and pastors carry out ministerial

tasks. <u>No wonder we can't motivate our people to participate</u> and serve. For years, they've been taught to watch.

Generations of teaching a non-discipleship gospel have produced churches filled with spiritual infants, and this is a problem. My wife, Kandi, and I have two boys, Rig and Ryder, and they have taught us everything we need to know about infancy. See, both of them had colic: Rig for a month and a half, Ryder for two months. With colic, because the infant's stomach is underdeveloped, they cry all the time. When they're hungry, they cry. When you feed them, they scream from the pain of eating. Every day, all day, unceasing, 24/7 wailing, filling every nook of solitude we could manufacture in a house with growing children. As you can tell, I'm over it. Not really.

We tried everything to soothe the pain. We tried gas drops. We tried Colic Calm. We even tried Nyquil. (I'm joking about the last one, but I did think about it.) Eventually, they grew out of that season. They became children. Then they went to elementary school, and soon they'll go to middle and high school. Finally, one day, they will move out of our house to take care of themselves. If Rig and Ryder hadn't grown out of their colic infancy, we wouldn't celebrate it; we would investigate the problem.

Why don't we apply the same scrutiny to people in our churches? A college student who graduated from our youth group unable to defend why they believe what they believe is a big issue. Undiscipled Christians who've attended church all their lives but are unable to share their faith, can't discern the things of God, and aren't growing in their faith is a serious concern. Walter Henrichsen, in his book *Disciples Are Made Not Born*, laments over the same issue: "We are shocked to the point of unbelief when we hear of a baby being left alone without proper care, but for some reason, our consciences are dulled when we hear of new babes in Christ being neglected. Left alone, they slip into carnality."<sup>5</sup>

We need to reframe the goal. <u>The Christian life begins at</u> baptism. We must stop acting like it is the end of their journey.

#### **E-NOW OVER D-NOW**

Surprisingly, moving people through a process from making a decision to become a mature follower of Jesus is a foreign idea in many churches today. An escapism mentality, on the other hand, permeates our evangelistic conversations: "You don't want to go to hell, do you? It's hot there. Choose heaven so you can spend eternity with God." While this is true, is it the whole gospel? Additionally, many are simply afraid to share their faith because they do not want to offend someone. This fear is typically grounded in the idea that we must emphasize the negative stakes.

For so many years, we have preached half the gospel by encouraging people to be saved *from* something—namely sin, wrath, damnation, and eternal punishment—and neglected the fact that we're saved *for* something. As an example, in student ministries across America, youth pastors navigate students through the three-humped camel: (1) disciple now or D-Now, which might as well be called E-Now (evangelize now) since it leans toward being a one-time event, (2) summer camp, and (3) fall/winter retreat. Each of these is formative in the life of a student and provides amazing opportunities for students who don't know Jesus to meet Him for the first time; however, all three of these events are aimed at seeing lost people saved—while believers hear sermons about going to a place they are already heading to. And we wonder why over half of our students never come back to church after going off to college!<sup>6</sup>

Scot McKnight, in his book *The King Jesus Gospel*, stresses that "focusing youth events, retreats, and programs on persuading people to make a decision disarms the gospel, distorts the numbers, and diminishes the significance of discipleship."<sup>7</sup> If we gauge our success by converting the lost, we will overlook the saved. Rather than focusing on one over the other, I would submit we adopt a both/and mindset.

Many students will believe in Christ prior to entering the youth ministry in the sixth grade. If we continue the "threehumped camel" approach, the majority of our ministries will be directed at the few lost people in the room. They will be subjected to evangelistic messages about avoiding hell and obtaining heaven: six camp sermons a year for six years that didn't teach them how to share their faith, how to grow as a Christian, how to defend what they believe, or how to endure hardship when life gets tough.

The dangers of the half-gospel have far-reaching ramifications. Our focus must be on presenting the full gospel to all people. We must ensure that we understand the critical nature of the work of the gospel in the life of believers after salvation. When we understand that the gospel is not only for the lost, we will be able to lead people to Jesus and teach them to be like Him.

# Discipleship Is Evangelism

It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow him. This revealed immediately the direction his evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow.

• ROBERT COLEMAN, THE MASTER'S PLAN OF EVANGELISM

We have an evangelism problem in the church because we have a discipleship problem. Allow me to explain. I would agree believers are sharing their faith less often than in years past. I agree that we are seeing fewer people converting to Christianity. I would also agree that the number of baptisms in all denominations is the lowest they have been in years. However, the problem isn't with the end result of sharing one's faith. It's a systemic problem that must be addressed upstream.

Imagine a scenario where I challenged two people to fill up a small pool with a five-gallon bucket of water each. The catch is that one of the buckets is a regular bucket from a home goods store, and the other is full of holes. Both participants begin the contest filling their buckets with water and running to the pool to empty them. One guy is filling up the pool at a steady pace; the other is lucky to dump whatever water he can because of the holes in his bucket. At what point do you think he will stop his tedious pursuit and begin fixing the problem?

Our churches are like this bucket with holes. We keep scooping our buckets into the pond, only to have most of it drain out. It's time to stop frantically filling our buckets and address where the holes are.

Frankly, we aren't seeing more baptisms in churches because people aren't equipped to share the gospel. We've spent so much time trying to make sure someone can share their faith with unbelievers that we've forgotten to teach them how to share their lives with them.

#### **NETWORK MARKETING FOR JESUS**

In the fall of 1995, my roommate, Gino, introduced me to a business opportunity that would change my life forever. I didn't know at the time, but this venture would prepare me for ministry eight years later. The Public Business Reception, as it was called, was held at the Holiday Inn every Thursday night in Metairie, Louisiana. At the first meeting I attended, I was presented with a plan that promised me financial freedom in just a few short years. This was music to my ears. As a nineteen-year-old college student, I needed money. I had only one problem: coming up with the five hundred dollars required to sign up. So I presented my father with the rudimentary business proposal in the best sales presentation I could give. And I made him an offer: "If you provide the upfront cost and contacts, I will work the business until I can pay you back your initial investment." He agreed. The rest was history—or heartache, depending on whom you ask. Within one week, my upline consultant, the one who signed me into the business, informed me that I had achieved Executive Field Trainer (EFT) in record time. I received this title by signing five people up in the business at five hundred dollars each. We were promoting local and long-distance phone service as a product. Yet I soon learned that with new signees came new responsibilities as well. For the first time in my life, my success depended on the success of those beneath me. I had to train, equip, and support the individuals in my down line. Within seven months, I had moved from EFT to Field Coordinator (FC). Each of my five signees replicated the process I had begun in them by enlisting five more people each to enroll in the business. The number of people working below me would determine how much money I would be making.

Obviously, this was a classic pyramid scheme, so it goes without saying that it didn't end well. But despite the setting and conclusion of the story, I learned to invest in other people. That business grew not through advertisements or massive conferences, but by empowering a few individuals to replicate what I had done with them.

I had tried the salesman approach: "If the money was right and it fit into your time schedule, would you be interested in looking at a serious business opportunity?" It may have piqued a few people's interests, but mostly it came across slick and rehearsed. I achieved much better results when I sat down with someone and shared what it had done for me and how my life had been changed—and how they could learn how to do what I was doing. I had to invest in people before they wanted a piece of what I had.

Sadly, some gospel presentations sound a lot like my pyramid scheme business pitch. People walk away feeling like they got sold something.

### **A CULTURE OF HABITUS**

The first- and second-century church was not built on revivals, mass crusades, and gospel pitches. It was built on the backbone of personal relationships. In his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Alan Kreider explains how the early church used slow, methodical methods and waited on God to build His church in the Roman world. The church grew around how they lived rather than by what they said. What struck me from reading the book was what Kreider called "habitus," the Christian way of living for the early believers. Their Christian values exuded in their business practices, sexual morality, acceptance of women and children, dependence on the Spirit's power, concern for the poor, and nonviolence and tolerance of those unlike them, all of which created a culture of patience.

Culture impacts everything from businesses to communities. First- and second-century believers created a culture that enticed those around them to the goodness of God and the joy of a relationship with Christ. They were walking witnesses or billboards of the gospel message. New Christians were drawn to Christ at a rapid rate. Kreider writes,

In the competitive religious market of the ancient Roman Empire, a new religion could succeed only if it "worked." People would join it only if it contributed something to their experience that made a difference in their lives, that rescued them from the things that trapped them, and that brought them to greater wholeness.<sup>8</sup>

In turn, the example lived before them was a paradigm for them to follow once they crossed the threshold of faith. Discipleship was nonnegotiable as well. Spontaneous baptisms were not the norm. Before a person could follow through with baptism, a believer was assigned to watch over and disciple them for upwards of a year. Similar to an accountability partner or sponsor in AA, the older believer would examine how the new convert would do business, lead his or her family, love his or her spouse, and walk with God. When the time came for baptism, the sponsor would vouch for the person. Their actions painted the picture of whether or not their lifestyle possessed the words they professed.

The early church father Tertullian said, "Christians are made, not born."<sup>9</sup> I don't think he was suggesting a worksbased salvation. He was highlighting the need for discipleship after someone is born again. Within this culture, a believer's first statement to a lost person wasn't "come to my church," for Christian worship gatherings during that period could be life-threatening. Their first interaction was to join them in their home for a meal to get to know them better. How different is our approach today?

#### **OVERSIGHT IN MY PREACHING**

My first sermon series at Long Hollow as the new pastor was called "The Great Omission." I exposited and explained every passage on discipleship to lay the groundwork for the days ahead. The topic didn't seem to resonate with the church members. In fact, it wasn't until years later that someone shared with me the disconnect people felt. Whenever I used the word *discipleship*, the people heard "non-evangelism." What most had in mind was a group of believers sitting in a room reading the Bible, quoting Scripture, and growing deep in spiritual truths

rather than bringing the gospel to those who didn't know it. This was off-putting for a church that had grown with a passion for taking the gospel to lost people.

Regrettably, I didn't learn this until years later. A discipleship strategy that doesn't lead to evangelism is not biblical disciplemaking. Likewise, an evangelism strategy that doesn't lead to discipleship is not biblical evangelism.

Replication is the crucial piece of the discipleship puzzle. Without it, we are steering a sinking ship. No one cares about the seating arrangement on the Titanic. You can arrange the chairs any way you like, but the ship is still going down. The same can be said about the church. Disciples must reproduce their lives into the lives of others.

#### ACCOUNTABILITY IN DISCIPLESHIP

A huge task my mentor Tim LaFleur assigned to me during a summer serving together in Glorieta, New Mexico, was to create a strategy to share the gospel with the local community in Santa Fe. Instead of reinventing the wheel, I decided to study existing methods with proven success. I learned and taught "Share Jesus Without Fear"<sup>10</sup> to the college students for a few weeks leading up to the big day when we would go into the square downtown to see God save people.

You couldn't have chosen a more difficult place to share your faith. The local community was riddled with New Age beliefs mixed with Native American spirituality. We didn't see many people professing faith in Christ, but that didn't discourage us from sharing stories with the group after we returned. The accountability of knowing each would have to disclose what happened in the square motivated the students to get over their fears. The common factor that led to success in each of these strategies was accountability.

The reason discipleship leads to evangelism is that you share out of the overflow of what you're learning. When you are saturated with the Word through memory, reading, and journaling daily, you can't help but share that with those around you.

Six weeks into my new discipleship group, Bobby started opening our meetings by telling about how he shared his morning reading with the customers he came in contact with. His journals from the meetings were the topic of conversation with everyone he met. I stopped him in the middle of another one of his weekly updates, "Bobby, did I make you share your morning reading with that man?"

"No," he responded. "Why?"

"What goes in the mind comes out of your mouth. You can't help but share the Word with others because it is getting into you."

The reason people don't share their faith with lost people is that they are running on empty. Outside of the weekly sermon, most don't get into the Word until the Word gets into them. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, "I don't read the Bible to preach. I preach because I have read the Bible." Scripture oozed out of him.

If you are leading a ministry or discipleship group, how are you holding your people to be accountable to share their faith? Long-term success comes through personal accountability.

Two questions I ask my discipleship group guys each week are:

### 1) Who did you share your faith with this week?

2) Did you even try?

The first question is accountability-driven. The second question reminds them that success comes in the sharing, not the saving. God is the one who saves, not us. Our goal is to share. The weekly group stories encourage those who are more timid and empowers those who haven't attempted to share. Hearing of others' successes (or attempts) encourages us.

The church is not evangelizing as much as it should. The numbers are clear, and few would argue the point. But the solution is not to rely solely on clarion calls to share the gospel more frequently. While people can be spurred on to share, they are missing accountability. It is in discipleship groups that we can not only encourage and expect people to be sharing the gospel but also have a protocol to hold one another accountable to the task.



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