

## Chapter 5

### THE PROBLEM WITH DIFFERENT GOSPELS

Somewhere along the timeline of history, our churches drifted from preaching Jesus' gospel to peddling different gospels, which are nothing more than cheap, powerless imitations. In my book, *Conversion and Discipleship*, I (Bill) have identified five different “gospels” being preached today: the forgiveness-only gospel; the gospel of the left; the prosperity gospel; the consumer gospel; and the gospel of the right.<sup>1</sup>

They all sound different, emphasize different theological preferences, and call people to different responses. None include discipleship. They all separate conversion from discipleship, thus making it optional. This separation should be deeply disturbing to us. Not only are we cloudy about what the true gospel is, but we're also surrounded with all kinds of different false gospels, which are really no gospels at all.<sup>2</sup>

#### Different Gospels

1. Forgiveness Only
2. Gospel of the Left
3. Prosperity
4. Consumer
5. Gospel of the Right

## A Discipleship Revolution

If we're going to see revival in twenty-first century churches across America, we're convinced it's not going to happen without a discipleship revolution. This revolution needs to happen everywhere—in Baptist churches in Missouri, Anglican churches in Arizona, Pentecostal churches in Pennsylvania, and non-denominational churches in California. We need a discipleship revolution in churches of every stripe and every location. This kind of discipleship revolution, however, will never happen unless and until the church returns to preaching the gospel that Jesus preached.

Unlike the gospels listed above, the gospel that Jesus preached didn't separate conversion from discipleship. For Jesus, discipleship wasn't an optional add-on. His gospel didn't just call people to pray a little prayer for their sins to be forgiven so they'd get to heaven when they died. (When you read the Gospels in the New Testament, do you ever see Jesus call people to respond to his gospel like this?) Jesus' gospel called people to follow him—unconditionally and with no excuses—no matter the cost and to the end. Jesus never taught that you could be a Christian and not be his disciple. In fact, he warned against such teaching. In Luke 6:46, Jesus asked the penetrating question, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I tell you?"<sup>3</sup> The gospel Jesus preached was a gospel that not only called people to be disciples but to *make* disciples. His gospel was a discipleship gospel.

## Assumption 1

As we stated earlier, this book has two underlying assumptions: The first is that *you cannot make Christlike disciples from a non-discipleship gospel*. This means we need to understand that the primary call

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of Jesus' gospel is encapsulated in two words: "Follow me." It also means that the longer we think people can be Christians without being disciples—that they can believe in Jesus without following him—the more we'll have to get used to our best disciple making efforts failing (no matter how sincere we might be or how much money we might spend). We can hire a discipleship pastor, buy the best discipleship curriculum, invite the most dynamic discipleship speakers to our church, and encourage the whole congregation to start making disciples—and it might work for a while. But if we continue preaching a non-discipleship gospel, even though some of our discipleship efforts might begin with a blaze of glory, they'll soon burn out. I know this because I've lived it.

The church where I (Ben) have been the senior pastor for the past seven years (Cypress Community Church in Salinas, California) is also my first experience as a senior pastor. When I arrived, I knew we needed to start making disciples, but I had very little idea of how to make that happen, despite having a master's degree in theology and ten years of ministry experience. So I prayed, read books, and talked to other pastors. I found that I wasn't alone in being a pastor who didn't know how to create a disciple making movement. I should have waited longer. I didn't. I went ahead and rolled out a new discipleship initiative like a red carpet for our congregation.

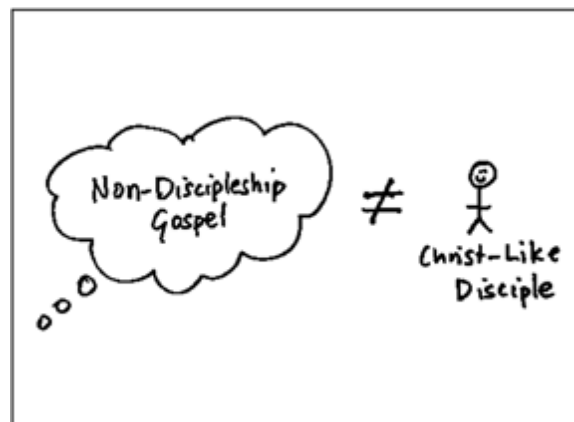
The discipleship initiative at Cypress began with a short six-week, high-energy sermon series on discipleship. It climaxed with a discipleship weekend with a national discipleship expert, who came to the church and led a discipleship seminar on Friday and Saturday, then preached on Sunday. Our expert did an excellent job. It was awesome! I was so excited—as were a lot of people in the church.

Our church staff signed up almost one hundred people into discipleship groups. We bought them all the best discipleship curriculum

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money could buy, gave them a page of detailed instructions on what to do, and set them loose on an incredible disciple making adventure. Overnight, our church went from zero discipleship groups to more than thirty. It was great!

Within a year, however, only three groups were left. None of the original groups had multiplied. That wasn't great. I was disappointed and disillusioned. In hindsight, I realize there was a fatal flaw with my amazing, well-funded discipleship strategy: I hadn't started with the gospel. I hadn't begun with a close examination of the gospel I was preaching. As a result, we were trying to make Christlike disciples while I was still preaching a non-discipleship gospel.



### Assumption 2

The second underlying assumption is *the gospel you preach determines the disciples you make*. If you preach a forgiveness-only gospel, you will make forgiveness-only disciples—people who think they don't need to obey Jesus' commands (or can go on sinning) and God's grace will abound all the more.<sup>4</sup> If you preach a consumer gospel, you'll make consumer disciples—people who "believe" in Jesus only so long as they get something out of it and it doesn't make them too uncomfortable. As soon as consumer disciples feel like following Jesus is too

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hard or inconvenient for them, they tap out. If you preach Jesus' gospel—which we are calling the “discipleship gospel”—then, and only then, do you have the opportunity to make Christlike disciples.

Understanding our two underlying assumptions helps us realize that when we connect the gospel and discipleship, as Jesus did, it empowers disciple making in our church. It also helps us see the continuity between belief and obedience. When Jesus called people to believe in the gospel, obedience wasn't detached from belief, but rather the fruit of it.<sup>5</sup> When we preach a gospel that calls people to be disciples and make disciples (as Jesus did), we unleash the power of the gospel and witness the maturation of Christlike disciples.

Now, if you've got alarm bells going off in your head because this sounds like works-salvation, a return to the old lordship-salvation debate, or an attack on God's grace, you're wrong. The discipleship gospel is none of these. Rather, it's a call for the church to return to the gospel that Jesus preached, a gospel that has seven essential elements.