

# the necessity of confusion

Confusion can be a good thing, especially when people need to change. We often discount confusion as disruptive, but most educators know that confusion can actually be the catalyst for change.

When I dialogue with people from various local church expressions across the Southeastern United States as well as in other parts of our country and portions of the world, they say the same thing: the way we have been doing discipleship has not produced the fruit Jesus intended. They assert that our common forms of discipleship do not lead to the multiplying lives moved by the Spirit that Jesus, Barnabas, Paul, Peter, John, and Timothy demonstrated for us in the New Testament.

I suggest that our typical forms of discipleship from the last forty years have been exaggerated reactions to the typical forms of evangelism from the forty years before that. Let me offer two examples.

Bill Faulkner mentored me from 2005 to 2010, and on several occasions he told me the story of his coming to trust Jesus as one of the converts from the “million more in fifty-four” campaign of 1954. His take on that experience and the twelve years that followed

it includes frustrations about feeling left unattended after he was one of the “million more” as well as disillusionment regarding the marketing tactics of the church during that time. The effort was to win as many as possible. What about walking together with the new converts to help them grow in Christ after they believe? Well, that wasn't part of the campaign.

By the 1980s, leaders had become quite disenfranchised with the results from these hyper-evangelistic efforts and overly seeker-sensitive tactics, and thus leaders did what most leaders do with extremes. They pushed away from them, creating a strong pendulum swing, leaving most traces of evangelism behind to embrace studying God's Word with extreme gusto.

The leaders who came out of this type of evangelism went from one exaggeration to another, from hyper-evangelism to hyper-discipleship. Another way to say hyper-discipleship might be “personal discipleship.” Confusion was present in both seasons. By the end of the first forty years, one might have questioned why this didn't result in enormous cultural transformation. Evangelism is what Jesus wants us to do, right? Then, coming to the end of the second forty years, one might be wondering why a hyper focus on discipleship didn't produce an exponential number of biblical thinkers who honored Jesus and could adequately defend the morals of Christendom. Well, it might be because, with regard to evangelism, Jesus didn't tell us to “make converts” or to “make apologists.”

Jesus commanded us to “make disciples.”

Is it possible that how we have compartmentalized and exaggerated discipleship and evangelism is not what Jesus intended at all?

Now, when I critique hyper-evangelism, I am *not* suggesting that we do not need to have compelling passion for delivering the Gospel of Jesus to our world. I'm simply saying that we must be com-

pelled to translate the Gospel of Jesus in the context of loving relationships. We should become evangelists who listen before we speak so that we can deliver the life-transforming message of the Good News of Jesus appropriately into the story and circumstances of each person with whom we share.

Now, when I critique *hyper-discipleship*—like with hyper-evangelism (above)—I am *not* suggesting that training Christ-followers to be biblical thinkers is not important. It is important! I'm simply saying that we need to encourage and equip Christ-followers to be biblical thinkers *in the context of loving relationships*. We should become “apologists” who can live in Gospel conversation with God, with ourselves, with other believers, and with those who have yet to believe, valuing each relationship along the way. We should become biblical thinkers who study the Bible not only for the sake of studying and learning, but also for the sake of discovering and living.

Francis Chan offers a helpful allegory to this point. He talks about commanding his daughter to go clean her room in a popular YouTube clip called, “Clean Your Room.”<sup>1</sup> He suggests that he doesn't intend for his daughter to come back to him excited that she memorized what he said—“Go clean your room”—or that she could say it in the Greek. Nor does he intend that his daughter return to exclaim that she gathered with some of her friends to study what he said and discuss the many nuances and implications of his instruction. No, he intended for her to obey it; he intended that she actually clean her room.

To be clear, Chan is not suggesting we have to clean our lives up to come to Jesus. He is challenging us to do more than just study Jesus' commands, including the command to make disciples. We should actually do it.

What a novel idea! Jesus might actually want us to make disciples, not just go and use an evangelistic tool with a stranger. He might actually want us to make disciples in relationship, not just retreat and study about how Jesus wants us to live individually. Jesus was explicit: “As you are going, make disciples...” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Let’s stay with the point here because many people today agree that we need to shift from informational discipleship to a more relational way of making disciples. Here are a few others.

Neil Cole agrees. I have heard him pose a challenging question before that I would paraphrase like this: does growing a church lead to making disciples or does making disciples lead to a growing church?<sup>2</sup>

Maybe the mission is to learn and live the ways of the Kingdom. Maybe the church is the community of people that emerges from this learning and living. Maybe all the functions of the church happen in the midst of our disciple-making relationships—like caring for each other, helping others trust Jesus, serving locally and globally, and gathering to encourage and send.

Here are a few others talking about this issue...

George Patterson, a former missionary to India, told me over coffee that he feels like the American church prohibits making disciples by our modern forms of discipleship. I would sum up what he said in this way: modern forms of discipleship extract new followers of Jesus out of their existing relationships (usually with those who have yet to believe), busy them with Christian studies, yet still expect them to somehow grow as disciple makers even though they’ve been removed from the people with whom they most easily could have had disciple-making relationship.

Jeff Vanderstelt asks of modern discipleship efforts, “Have we idolized Bible study?”<sup>3</sup>

Alan Hirsch proposes that *communitas*, as he calls it—not just “community”—is necessary for disciples to learn and live the ways of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> One cannot love and obey Jesus and live on mission with Him as a result of isolated, personal discipleship.

Bill Hull and Ben Sobels suggest that we aren’t making disciples who make disciples, because we have taught an incomplete Gospel (i.e., a Gospel not focusing on the Kingdom and how compelling it is that we get to live with the King and with one another).<sup>5</sup>

Jim Putman asserts that discipleship as we know it has done nothing more than create a bunch of Christian children saying “mine, mine, mine” about all things related to the church.<sup>6</sup>

So, now what do we do?

Here's a thought: what if we shifted from discipleship as an isolated, informational, self-improvement process at a place we call “church” to disciple making all over the place as a self-denying rhythm as we invite a few people along with us in family-like relationships?