

# Introduction

## STAYING THE COURSE

One day, at a very young age, I was riding in the car with my dad on a steep mountain road that overlooked a deep valley. I don't remember the purpose of our journey, but since we're a hunting family, I am sure it had something to do with scouting a new hunting spot. Several times as we traversed this narrow mountain road, I could look over the sharp edge and see the bottom of the valley far below. Nothing kept us from rolling to our impending doom except my dad's driving skills. As I watched him cautiously navigate the curves, my dad explained that some roads have guardrails along the perilous stretches to clearly mark the safe boundaries and keep vehicles from unintentionally straying into dangerous areas.

It's been a long time since that day when I learned the importance of literal guardrails, and along the pathways of life, I also learned about the importance of the *guardrails of ministry*. I responded to God's call to ministry 17 years ago. Along that journey, great friends and co-laborers have often reminded me of the Lord's loving kindness as God has kept me on course. His faithfulness is something I needed along the way, because ministry in Jesus' church is not for the faint of heart! Looking back even now, I see assumptions I have made in

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error, moments that reveal my naiveté, and days of blindness due to my selfish motives. I've had great victories, in spite of myself. God has been faithful to keep me squarely on course.

My initial call into ministry goes back to Real Life Ministries in Post Falls, Idaho. The senior pastor there, Jim Putman, and I—along with the other guys on our team—watched the Lord grow our church to over 8,000 in attendance in a county of 100,000 people. At that size, we still had *thousands* of people in small groups and saw over 700 people baptized some years. As a result, churches would ask us what we were doing to make this happen. At times we struggled to answer their questions because we couldn't quite put our finger on what was happening. But we were certain that God was doing something incredible in our midst and we knew his Spirit was laying a foundation for us and creating a platform from which we could help other churches.

God prompted us to pause during this crazy journey and intentionally evaluate some of the key practices that helped us stay on course. Jim would say, "Sometimes we might be on the rumble strips or in the ditch, but at least we are on the right road." I can look back and see that there were temptations to veer off course or to take an off-ramp, but we remained on the right road.

That's what I mean by stay the course with the help of guardrails: we were on the journey of making disciples, and by his grace, God kept us on the track to do that. Making disciples had been our primary aim since the beginning of the church, and yet we risked unintentionally straying from the disciple making path and sometimes we even faced the temptations of intentionally following a different path. We could have easily become sidetracked by the temptations associated with seeking numerical church growth, big Sunday morning "productions" that draw the crowds, or even notoriety that comes

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from cultivating a public image. However, pursuing these things can negatively affect our efforts of making disciples. We needed to identify what it would take to stay on course for the long haul.

As we evaluated the way we had navigated the sometimes bumpy—but always exhilarating—road of ministry, we discovered some practices that are vital to staying on the healthy road of disciple making. We identified seven essential practices, and these “seven essentials” were the guardrails that helped us to avoid making a wrong turn or to go a different direction. They kept us on the right road and helped us stay the course. I share with you these seven essential practices by way of introduction. I pray that the Holy Spirit will guide and direct you into a deeper understanding of them as you travel along your journey:

1. *Abiding in Christ.* Every step toward making true disciples must be rooted in our personal walk with the Lord.
2. *Reaching the Lost.* Many in the Church believe that reaching the lost is the end goal, but with discipleship as our focus, helping the world meet Jesus is the beginning of the journey, not the end.
3. *Connecting the Unconnected.* Believers must first be connected to God in a deeper way and then connected to other believers in authentic relationships.
4. *Chase the Strays.* It is our responsibility as ministers to go after those who have pulled away from the body of Christ and to draw them close to help them grow and connect.
5. *Shepherd toward Spiritual Maturity.* We must guide believers into a place of maturity in Christ, not leaving them to remain

stagnant or struggling.

6. *Release Leaders.* Helping believers discover and develop their potential in Christ and releasing them to use their gifting for the Kingdom of God is vital for healthy disciple making.

7. *Function as a Team.* The greatest tool we have as a church is unity.

Having established my foundation in making disciples at Real Life, God began stirring my wife, Amber, and me to step away from Real Life in 2009 and expand the Kingdom of God in another location. The guardrail principles above, which will be our focus throughout this book, would be tested in new ways, ways I had never before experienced. God called our family to Houston, Texas after much waiting, toil, and prayer, where we served at Metropolitan Baptist Church for three years. We helped them transition into a biblical, disciple making church. I knew from past experience that their—and my—spiritual health was not going to happen by accident; it requires our effort and divine guidance from God. Transitioning an older, established church required setting strong boundary markers to keep them on the road of disciple making. Without these boundaries, it's easy for anyone making this transition to say things like, "We've never done it this way" or "Don't change my church."

During my experiences there, God clarified my beliefs about leading a disciple making church and he confirmed these seven essential practices as effective guardrails. This book contains the precious truths I have taken away from that process. Now, as a senior pastor leading another church, I recognize that God will use these seven essentials to help build an effective disciple making body. We must embrace them as protective boundaries for our ministry.

While speaking at conferences or consulting with churches, I encounter pastors and church leaders who desperately want to make disciples. They dream of leading a church that fulfills the Great Commission, but something happens and they find themselves once again on an off-ramp or, even worse, heading toward a cliff that may result in serious damage to their local church.

This book is designed to challenge you not only to implement the seven essential practices in your church, but also to personally live them out. One of the greatest things the Lord has taught me about discipleship is this:

*Being a disciple is not about what I do, but about who I am!*

Let's explore that truth together. Come, travel the road with me. Reflect and receive the challenge to see how to put in place the guardrails God gives us. He guards us from pitfalls for our health, both in our personal walk and in our corporate journey as the church.

## **READ**

Prepare yourself for the upcoming chapters by reading John 15:9-17 to learn about the importance of love and abiding in Christ.

## **REFLECT**

Ask yourself these questions as you evaluate your own spiritual life:

1. What is a pivotal moment in my life where God protected me from imminent spiritual danger?

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2. What has God taught me about one of the seven guardrails listed above?
3. How has God clarified the importance of making disciples in my life?

### **ACT**

Identify which one of the seven guardrails listed above you most want to know better as you continue reading this book.