

## **An Exploration of Jesus' Model of Discipleship and Insights for the Contemporary Church**

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### **Abstract**

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In Mathew 28:19–20, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey his teachings. He sent them out to do what he had taught and demonstrated to them during his earthly ministry. Today, the mandate to make disciples through discipleship, evangelism, and missions is foundational for any Bible-believing church. This mandate is not only to the church as a whole but to all individual disciples of Jesus Christ. However, observably, in this process, some believers are unwilling to share their faith and would instead relegate the duty to pastors and a few willing to reach out. This study enables congregations to align their discipleship models to the model set by Jesus Christ as seen in the Gospel accounts and the apostolic church. Jesus' model of discipleship begins with a conversion experience and involves faith development through learning from the example and teachings of Jesus. It involves being rooted, growing up, maturing, and being strengthened in faith. A faithful implementation of Jesus' model of discipleship today will guarantee spiritual growth, church growth, and believers' willingness to share their faith. The study employed the library research method.

**Keywords:** Disciple, Discipleship, Jesus, Gospels, Spiritual Formation, Church Growth.

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### **Introduction**

Just before his ascension, Jesus gave a charge to his disciples; “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I

have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of age” (Matt 28:18–20).<sup>1</sup> Having spent considerable time with his disciples, Jesus now released them to proclaim the Gospel message to the nations. Based on this charge, the church today continues to implement the Great Commission by making disciples of all nations. However, there’s been less emphasis on the second part of the commission, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Apart from going out, there is a mandate to intentionally make disciples by teaching them to establish proper faith foundations. Discipleship is not merely about transferring information; instead, the essence of discipleship is not information but transformation.<sup>2</sup> As a result, are two existential dangers. The first danger is raising people who know much about discipleship but with no genuine conversion. The second challenge is the obsession with numbers, thus taking a shortcut in declaring people to be disciples without taking them through the process and showing them the cost of discipleship. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer brings out the concept of “cheap grace.”<sup>3</sup> A situation where believers want to live as though they are followers of Christ but never practice or obey the things required in the life of a Christian. In other words, the concept of cheap grace is evident where there is no authentic Christian living. Therefore, the church in the contemporary context needs to learn from Jesus’ model of discipleship and the example from the apostolic church to gain insight for today. The following section looks at the review of relevant literature and explores Jesus’ model of discipleship.

## Literature Review

Generally, the word “discipleship” has been used to refer to the relationship between Jesus and his disciples or encourage a particular lifestyle. Also, it is used in contexts that deal with establishing new believers in the faith by the exercise of Christian disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The subsection below looks at the terminologies as used in the Bible.

### *Biblical Understanding of Disciple and Discipleship*

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<sup>1</sup> In the paper, the New International Version (NIV) is used consistently.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley, Phillip Nation, *Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow* (B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Translated by R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1963 (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia W. Collinson, *Making Disciples: The Significance of Jesus Education Methods for Today’s Church*, (Paternoster Press, 2004), 4.

In the Old Testament and Hebrew, the word equivalent to the Greek *mathētēs* (disciple) is *talmîd*, and it means one who is a pupil or the “taught one.”<sup>5</sup> The term means different things in the Old Testament. Ezra uses the term to refer to a group of musicians in 1 Chronicles 25:8, the same word used in Isaiah 8:16.<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah the prophet sought to show that some are disciples to do evil in (Jer 13:23). In summary, the Old Testament highlights the relationship between the teacher-student and master-follower relationship. Other examples in the Old Testament of those who had teacher-learner relationships include Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, among many others. In the rabbinic sphere, the *talmîd* devoted himself to learning Scripture and the religious tradition passed on through his teacher. Expectedly, in the end, the disciple would become a teacher after a period of listening and learning.<sup>7</sup> Being a disciple involves commitment and the acceptance of the views and practices of the teacher or disciple.<sup>8</sup>

In the New Testament, the Greek word *mathētēs* and its derivatives are commonly used. Notable figures like Jesus, John the Baptist, and even Pharisees had disciples. According to M. J. Wilkins, the term ‘disciple’ (*mathētēs*) from the verb to learn (*manthano*), was first used by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and frequently appeared in classical Greek.<sup>9</sup> The term discipleship refers to “the way of life expected of all believers in Jesus Christ,” while the term discipling refers to “the mode and method of teaching in the discipleship.”<sup>10</sup> There was an emphasis on the relationship between the teacher and the learner, “knowledge was being imparted over a period of time, and the learner imitated him much as an apprentice would today.”<sup>11</sup> In most cases, the relationship was so firm that even after the teacher’s death, the group continued, as we see with the disciples of Jesus. Even when new teachings arise, their instructions are regarded as a natural development of the doctrines of the founder.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilkin, *The Concept of Disciple in Mathews Gospel: A Reflection on the Use of the Word Mathētēs*, (Leiden, the Netherlands, E.J. Brill 1988) 12, 14–41.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars disagree if it referred to followers of Isaiah or of God, but I will take that it means both, using the analogy of Paul the apostle of following him as he followed Christ.

<sup>7</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1: A - D* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995), 947.

<sup>8</sup> J. Oswald Sanders and J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship: With Study Guide*, Commitment to Spiritual Growth Series (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkins, M J. *The Concept of Disciples in Matthews Gospel as Reflected in the Use of the Term (Mathētēs)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).14-41

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Rengstorf, K. H. *Mathētēs* in G. Kittle(Ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967, 416.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 425.

Discipleship to Jesus and the rabbis had some areas of similarities and differences, “Jesus was widely recognized as a teacher of considerable repute even though he lacked the rigorous formal training customary for the Jewish rabbis (Mark 6:2–3).<sup>13</sup> Throughout his public ministry, he was referred to as ‘teacher’ 45 times ‘rabbi’ 14 times and ‘master’ six times.”<sup>14</sup> As a teacher, he used several teaching methods to disciple his followers, and in the process, developed the whole principle of discipleship. He employed what most of us see today as small groups and other tools mentorship or apprenticeship. They did not have access to books and materials and educational privileges of today. But the disciples had to stay with the teacher until they had understood the subject matter. This relational process eventually led to a very close and deep friendship because they knew the deep things about one another.

### **Jesus’ Model of Discipleship**

Questions abound on what discipleship looks like and how it should be done and understood. Some of these details have been discussed above. The Bible, and more so the New Testament, gives us an account of Jesus’ discipleship process. A closer look at Jesus’ model will enable us to critically look at the prevalent models in the contemporary church and hopefully rediscover the proper model to enable churches to experience growth.

### **An Encounter with Jesus as the Beginning Point**

Jesus started His public ministry with a message of repentance for the kingdom of God was at hand (Matt 4:17). This was in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, where he saw two brothers who were fishermen. The invitation to the transforming life in Christ came to them in a simple but profound analogy when he said to them, “follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”<sup>15</sup> They left their fishing nets and followed him, so did two other brothers James and John, who were fishermen. Recognizably, Jesus called the entire team of twelve and many other disciples, including women. The calling of these men led them to a discipleship process in which they were justified in God’s eyes and prepared for the service of the Father. They did not have the exact details of where they were going and the nature of their calling, but they began a journey of

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<sup>13</sup> In Mark 6:2, during the Sabbath, Jesus taught in the synagogue and many who heard him were astonished saying “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hand?” They were astonished because they knew Jesus as having no formal training.

<sup>14</sup> Arndt F. and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago, 1957, 300.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 4:19

intimately knowing the one who had called them. What followed was a daily personal and practical experiences that transformed their worldviews.

J. Dwight Pentecost, in his book, *Design for Discipleship*, states, “There is a vast difference between being saved and being a disciple. Not all men who are saved are disciples, although all who are disciples are saved. In discussing the question of discipleship, we are not dealing with a person’s salvation. We are dealing with a person’s relationship to Jesus Christ as his Teacher, Master and his Lord.”<sup>16</sup> For this life-changing experience to take place, one has to develop an intimate relationship with Christ. In the gospels, a multitude could come to him as he was teaching, but when they had gone, his disciples would again ask for understanding based on the teachings to the multitude. Dwight rightly remarks that not all that learned become disciples, but all that become disciples did learn from the master.

Therefore, according to Jesus’ model of discipleship, one must be born of God to become a disciple of Christ. An encounter with Jesus, the Savior of the world, is foundational in the discipleship process. A person should repent and turn to Christ in faith for salvation. The book of Romans 10:17 records “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” The devotional author A. W. Tozer wrote,

The doctrine of justification by faith—a biblical truth and a blessed relief from sterile legalism and unavailing self-effort—has in our time fallen into evil company and been interpreted by many in such manner as actually to bar men from the knowledge of God. The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and spiritless. Faith may now be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without creating any special love for him in the soul of the receiver. The man is ‘saved,’ but he is not hungry or thirsty after God. In fact, he is specifically taught to be satisfied and encouraged to be content with little.<sup>17</sup>

He points out the dangers of conversions being made mechanical and life-less; that is, conversions that do not demand an ethical and godly living.

A person who has responded to Christ’s call gets to have a relationship with him and grows in that relationship to become “fisher of men.” This is what it means to become a follower or disciple of Christ. In John 8:31, Jesus instructed the Jews who believed in him, “If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed,” meaning that those who go a step

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<sup>16</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids M.I, 1996), 8.

<sup>17</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948), 12–13.

farther to respond to the truth they had received become eligible to be called true disciples. True disciples of Jesus, even today, follow him and obey his teachings. Having an intellectual curiosity of the teachings of Christ or merely listening to his word without the obedience and acknowledgment of his Person hinders one from becoming a true disciple. The foundation of discipleship is salvation experience, but disciples' making is built on the relationship between the individual and Christ.

### Denying Oneself

This brings us to one of the most demanding aspects of being a disciple, and Jesus did not mince his words when he addressed the disciples. In Luke 9:18-27, while he was with his disciples, he asked them who people say he is? Through a revelation, Peter, one of the disciples, declared Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. In verse 23, he states, "if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." A similar statement is made in Luke 14:27 "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Even though Jesus called the twelve to become his followers, he still gave them the charge that being a disciple entails more than just having faith in Christ. There is the task of bearing or denying oneself as a response to the truth. This denial demonstrates that indeed we are His disciples. Dwight gives a summary of the same saying,

Discipleship involves commitment. It involves identification with Christ in His shameful death. Discipleship involves renunciation of oneself; it involves setting aside one's own aims, goals, ambitions, and desires in life. It involves sacrifice for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. It involves setting aside one's own will and one's own right to his life and acknowledging Christ has the right to be obeyed, the right to rule.<sup>18</sup>

The true disciples of Jesus need to count the cost and lose what pertains to self to gain something of greater value.

In John 6, Jesus, "the bread of life," stresses this truth when he fed the 5000. In verse 48, Jesus claims that he had come to give life so that those who believe in him will never die. Again in verse 53, he figuratively reveals the hard truth, "Truly truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you." This statement made many people to walk away from him; and it prompted him to ask the twelve if they also wanted to

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<sup>18</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids M.I, 1996), 12.

leave him. Those who do not follow and carry out the will of God are certainly not true disciples of Jesus.

The discipleship model of Christ invites all people to come to him and enjoy true rest. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus invites all to learn from him, “come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” This statement was addressed to a people who lived under the Mosaic Law and held a strong following to the teachings of the Pharisees. Instead of freedom, obedience to the law brought oppression which comes with condemnation and guilt. The Pharisees had no power to set the people free from this nature of bondage, but Jesus states that this is what he came to offer. It may sound like a contradiction that he offers rest, yet there is still a yoke to carry. But in Christ, there is marvelous freedom and rest. The discipleship model that Jesus gives is no longer about observing what the law commands and refraining from all its prohibitions but is more of a friendship and relationship. The life of a disciple is full of activity because Christ is working in that life, and the fruit of the Spirit is manifested. Thus, the disciples learn from the Master, apply his teachings to real-life situations, and win souls to Christ. The invitation to learn from Christ is life-long. In the process of learning from Christ, one should be able to unlearn the old ways that are not in agreement with the ways of Christ.

The discipleship of Jesus started by calling his disciples from various backgrounds to come to him and learn from him. They spend quality time of spiritual formation that sought to form them as a new people. Later, after their formation period, Jesus would send them out to make disciples of all nations. The disciples of Jesus eventually paid the cost of discipleship with their lives. Tradition indicates that many of the disciples of Jesus were martyred. The following subsection shows three methods Jesus used in his discipleship.

### *Teaching*

The gospels portray Jesus as a teacher who used diverse teaching methods. First, he taught with authority. The Bible states, “The people were amazed at His teaching, for He taught with real authority- quite unlike the teachers of religious law” (Mark 1:22). He was able to speak with authority because all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him (Matt 28:18). Second, we see Jesus, through life events, open up to the disciples in teaching them lessons that would mold the individuals to fulfill a given capacity of duty in life. Particularly, he taught them

essentials like prayer, service, and love. The teachings of the Bible need to be equally taught with authority even today. The Bible is the authority given in matters of faith and practice to each disciple of Jesus. Zinke remarks, “Leave the impression upon the mind that the Bible and the Bible alone, is our rule of faith, and that the sayings and doings of men are not to be a criterion for our doctrines or actions”<sup>19</sup> The teachings of Jesus should form the basis for discipleship. The content of discipleship should be the enduring word of God.

### *Training*

The difference between teaching and training hinges on the idea that teaching is more theoretical and abstract while training is more hands-on and practical. On several occasions, Jesus sent out his disciples to practice and apply what they had been taught. Healing the sick, casting out demons, and proclaiming the kingdom of God was part and parcel of the training they had to undergo. He taught them, but he also sent them out to practice what they had been taught and seen Jesus do. He helped his disciples overcome their failures and weaknesses. For instance, after his resurrection, he reinstated Peter and helped Thomas overcome the issue of doubt. The training also involves living a godly life (1 Tim 4:7). The call to make disciples has a lot to do with practical aspects, which we find in the words of William Law “Christianity is not a school for the teaching of moral virtue, the polishing of our manners, or forming us to live a life of this world with decency and gentility. It is deeper and more divine in its design, and much noble ends. It implies an entire change of life, a dedication of ourselves, our soul, our bodies unto God in the strictest and highest sense of the words.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Leadership and Authority*

Jesus was keen to differentiate the nature of authority he had from all other forms of human power. He possessed not human authority but a divine authority (John 15:5). This distinction helped shape how the disciples viewed their ministry and influence. They were to use derived authority to transform individuals and society. At the same time, although he had a different source of authority, he did not disrespect the authorities in place as he still acknowledged that they were from God. Instead, he was able to shape the mind of the disciples to know how to address human authorities. Jesus, in his training, instructed them how to relate with authorities as

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<sup>19</sup> <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jats/vol15/iss1/6/>

<sup>20</sup> William Law, “Christian Perfection 2,” in *The Works of the Rev. William Law*, Vol. 3, 263.



they disciple the nations. The Great Commission is only possible through the power of God that in Christ, and now available to believers through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

Mark 10:35–45 highlights how Jesus viewed leadership and authority. In verse 42, “you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” He revealed how the worldly leaders had misplaced the idea of authority and leadership, but this was not to be so among his disciples who are to be servants. Jesus exemplified service in his ministry, “even the Son of man is not exempted from the rule of humble service to the kingdom. He is, in fact, per excellence the example of it, especially in his redemptive mission. He came as a servant, giving his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, biblical discipleship leads to the service of God’s people and world.

### **The Early Church and Jesus’ Model of Discipleship**

During the apostolic era, it was usual that the mature believers taught the young ones in matters of faith. Apostle Paul reminds his mentee about this nature of discipleship as not just an avenue for passing biblical information but where a person’s character is changed and becomes helpful in God’s ministry. He charges Timothy, “follow the patterns of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1: 13–14). The disciplers should help others, over time, to become like Jesus and fulfill their areas of callings. The disciples of Jesus applied the teachings of Jesus, thus showing that Jesus’ model of discipleship is livable. This is one of the reasons that the early church was able to equip believers for outreach, even when it involved offering their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

In addition, the task of discipleship involves entrusting the ministry to trustworthy individuals who can further pass it on to others. Apostle Paul instructed his disciple Timothy, “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust unto reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2). The passing down of the Gospel to another generation requires teaching others for ministry in their generation. In the same context, Paul calls Timothy to train people on godly living and endure suffering like Jesus. It is rightly

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, John R. Kohlenberger III, *The Expositors Bible Commentary, New Testament* (Zondervan Corporation, 1994), 275.

noted, “the role of a faithful Christian is not just belief and loyal transmission of tradition, it entails suffering as well.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, there is also a call for endurance in the process of discipling.

In 2 Timothy 3:10–17, Paul’s shows the kind of leadership and authority to be exercised within the church context. Moreover, he gives examples of the right people to follow as discipplers; these are people who should have experience with Christ and obey his word. It can therefore be concluded that the apostolic church paid close attention to the discipleship model of Jesus.

### *Discipleship During the Era of the Apostolic Fathers*

The model of discipleship continued to the era of the Apostolic Fathers.<sup>23</sup> For instance, after the death of the 12 Apostles, Clement the Bishop of Rome (AD 88–99) wrote a letter to Corinth in response to some controversy and instituting the apostles’ authority. According to him, “Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving constituted the regular and essential structures of Christian spirituality... the care for others and deep senses of humility are necessary in the believer even though that person has received election from the loving God. It was this that kept Christianity in the early period from becoming just another elitist spiritual movement.”<sup>24</sup> There was an emphasis on authentic Christian living and reaching out to others.

Polycarp AD 69–155 was a Bishop of Smyrna, emphasized open confession of believer’s self-identity in relation to Christ.<sup>25</sup> Further, one of the most intriguing issues raised by the Didache is that Gentiles joining the Didache community were not obligated to become ‘perfect’ Torah observant Jews but were expected to focus on personal transformation and good works.<sup>26</sup>

Observably, the kind of discipleship in modern churches primarily emphasizes programs, numbers, and the acquisition of knowledge of discipleship. While this is important, discipleship in churches should embody Jesus’ model of discipleship that prioritizes believers’ conversion, character transformation, and maturity.<sup>27</sup> Misguided models of discipleship result in church membership that does not understand the nature, cost, and goal of biblical discipleship. Due to such unbiblical models, many who profess to be Christians are just nominal Christians with no

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<sup>22</sup> John Barton, John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1255.

<sup>23</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the translations of their works to English brought out the works of these Apostolic Fathers, also known as Church Fathers. They were the immediate successors after the apostles of Christ.

<sup>24</sup> Richard A. Burridge, “Jesus and the origin of Christian spirituality”, in *The Story of Christian Spirituality Two Thousand Years from the East to the West*, ed. Gordon Mursell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 36.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wace/bioidict.html?term=Polycarpus,%20bishop%20of%20Smyrna>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249762583\\_The\\_Apostolic\\_Fathers\\_The\\_Didache](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249762583_The_Apostolic_Fathers_The_Didache)

<sup>27</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Third Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 213.

zeal to live a godly life and witness the Gospel to the world. Therefore, churches need to recapture the model set by Jesus and the early church to fulfill the Great Commission. A true disciple of Jesus Christ must count the cost of following Jesus. Charles Spurgeon expounds that taking the yoke of Jesus upon oneself implies that if Christ saves you, he must be your Master, and you must be his servant; you cannot have him as Savior if you do not accept him as a lawgiver and commander. If you will not do as he bids you, neither shall you find rest to your soul.<sup>28</sup> The disciples of Jesus should understand that following Jesus comes with a cost and commitment to be made.

## Conclusion

The commission Jesus gave to his disciples in Mathew 28:19–20 involved going out and making disciples of all nations. Christians need to learn from Jesus’ model of discipleship as recorded in the Gospel accounts to execute this biblical mandate properly. Jesus called his disciples to be with him and learn from him before sending them out to the world. The divine calling to the individuals needed a response. The intentional process developed the transformed the individuals into bold witnesses of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. After the ascension of Jesus, the Early Church implemented Jesus’ model in building up the body of Christ and in equipping witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ. The New Testament demonstrated that the model of discipleship by Jesus is practical and functional. Churches today need to align their discipleship models to the model set by Christ and the apostolic church. Biblical discipleship should lead to a change of life, growth in the things of God, and maturing in faith. The goal of discipleship is not to produce religious people or who know a lot about discipleship. Rather, true discipleship produces believers who are transformed in their hearts, repentant, gospel-centered, Spirit-led and have a commitment to live for Jesus and be his witnesses. Inevitably, spiritual growth, healthy church growth, and believers’ willingness to share their faith will be witnessed if the church implements the Jesus model of discipleship. Again, the church will only experience meaningful growth and intrinsic motivation to outreach when those who build it do it according to the blueprint laid by Jesus and the Early Church and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “*Rest for the Labouring*” in Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publication, 1971), 22:621.

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