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Building a Discipling Culture

by Mike Breen and Steve Cockram

A Book Review

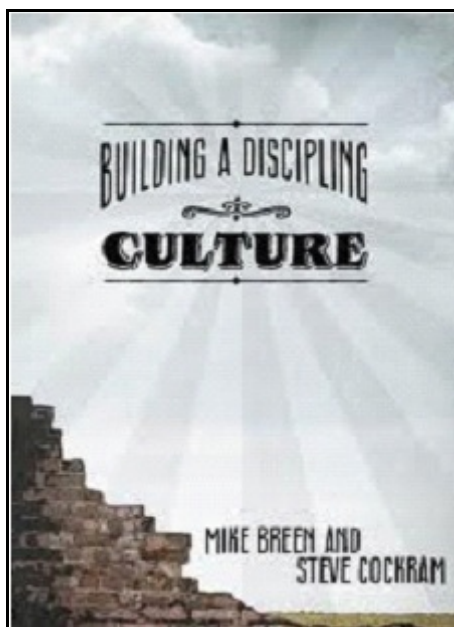
by Jack De Vries

Churches without a process or with a complicated process for making disciples are floundering. Yet

churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom. This is what Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger write in their book *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (B&H Publishing: 2006). They point out that church leaders who have designed a simple biblical process to make disciples are effectively advancing the movement of the gospel.

Discipleship or making disciples is not our invention but precisely what Jesus called us to in the great commission (Matthew 28:19ff). During my seminary years in the early 1980's I read David Watson's book *Called & Committed: World Changing Discipleship*. This book, more than any other book besides the Bible, changed my life and focus in ministry. I became convinced that this is where it is at for believers and churches: **the task of making disciples**. To this day I am committed to completing this task. This is not difficult. You build relationships with people and teach them everything Jesus taught us. But how do

you build a discipling culture in a local church? This is not so easy. So often as churches we get so busy with everything else but the task of making disciples. This is what I like about the book *Building a Discipling Culture* coauthored by Mike Breen and Steve Cockram. Not only do they build a case for the importance of discipling, but they offer a number of skills and tools to actually do it.

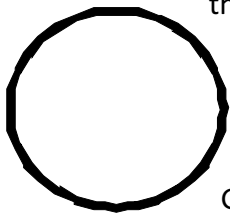


Breen and Cockram begin making their case for discipling in the early pages of their book: “Effective discipleship builds the Church, not the other way round. We need to understand the Church as the *effect* of discipleship and not the *cause*. If you set out to make disciples, you will inevitably build the Church. If you set out to build the Church, there is no guarantee you will make disciples.” (7-8) Jesus plan is that we are to make disciples; there is no plan B.

The book is structured around a number of different geometric shapes: the circle, semi-circle, triangle, etc. These shapes, which the authors call LifeShapes, are introduced as mnemonic devices. One wonders if the shapes dictate the various “tools” of discipleship or the other way around. This is one of only a few criticisms of this book. Having said that, if these LifeShapes help the reader to remember the key ideas of discipling, then – well, enough said.

The first “tool of discipleship” is what the authors call “the learning circle.” They stress the importance of a lifestyle of learning. In Mark’s gospel Jesus’ very first teaching was on this subject: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:14-15) They make the point that our journey of faith is not linear, but like a circle, it is a continuous process. There are moments in our lives when we are confronted with events, ideas, situations, etc., when we have the God-given opportunity to enter into a process of learning kingdom living. The *circle* represents this journey – a journey of repenting and believing. The authors suggest that there are three spokes in both the wheel of repentance and the wheel of believing (faith). In discipling someone (or being disciplined) repenting = observe + reflect + discuss; believing = plan + account + act. Various illustrations from the Bible are given as examples of this circle of learning. The authors stress that this is not a one time act – but a continuous process, very much like a slinky – an ongoing journey of repenting and believing.

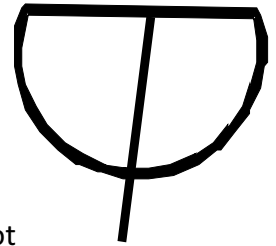
Discipleship involves helping one another in fruitful living. Jesus stressed that when we abide in Him and he is us, we will bear much fruit. (John 15:5) But how do encourage fruitful living? In answer to that question Breem and Cockram suggest the importance of the semi-circle (with a pendulum attached). Referring to the Genesis story of creation they emphasize the important principle of life: “we are to work from our rest, not rest from our work.” (47) The first day of existence for Adam and Eve was a day of rest.



Then the work began. So too, the authors insist, we have to begin our activity of bearing fruit from a place of rest.

“Fruitfulness happens in stages and seasons: abide, grow, bear fruit, prune, abide. This the rhythm of the swinging pendulum, the Semi-Circle....

We cannot bear fruit if we do not spend time abiding. But we cannot simply stay put in the abide mode, for a branch that does not eventually bear fruit will be cut off and cast into the fire.” (49) This chapter is alone worth the price of the book – encouraging followers

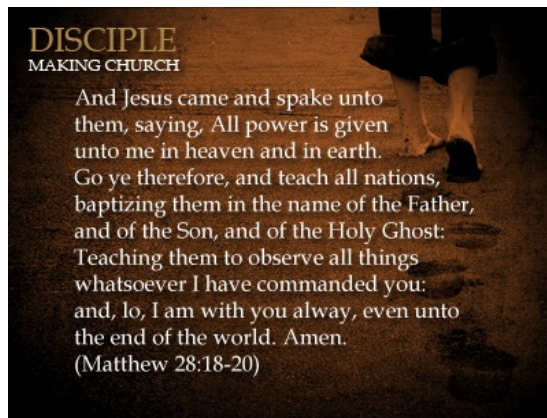
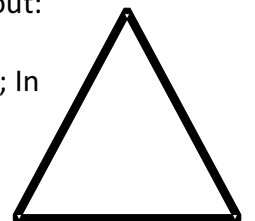


of Christ to follow His example: “Jesus made rest a priority, and we are to follow his example.” (56)

First the circle, then the semi-circle, and then the

triangle: three-dimensional living. If we are to make disciples we need to model our lives after the Master, as the authors point out:

“Jesus lived out his life in three relationships: Up - with his Father; In - with his chosen followers; and Out - with the hurting world around him.” (57-58) This is an easy way to describe the kind of relationships we should have as Jesus’ disciples: up, in, and out – the three sides of a triangle. “There is no secret formula to church growth. All healthy churches, small groups, and ministries grow. To be healthy, you must be in relational balance as pictured in the triangle: Up-In-Out. It really is that simple.” (64) There is some beauty in this simplicity, and as I read this chapter I wondered, why do we as churches often make it so complicated? I agree; it really is that simple.



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In chapter 8 of the book Breem and Cockram discuss a leadership model for the local church. They use a square to describe the four stages or phases of leadership. I invite you to pick up your own copy of this book to delve deeper into this leadership model. This is one of the more complicated chapters of the book, and you might have to read it several times to grasp the four stages of leadership – but hang in there: the principles shared are basic to leadership. Leaders are not born; they are made. It takes time, discipline, and intentionality. As churches we often put people into leadership without equipping them as leaders. This chapter will give you helpful ideas to shape your disciples into leaders.

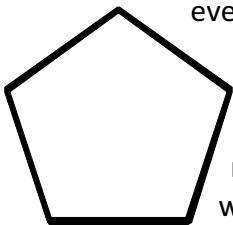


for the prophet. We are all called to share the Good News with others, but this takes all those who are not called to be evangelists out of their comfort zones. And we are not all apostolic, but must all learn to walk out into what God calls us to do. We are the body of Christ, which means that together, we represent the ministry of Jesus who was the embodiment of all five ministries in Ephesians 4.... By experiencing all five areas of ministry ... we grow more into the likeness and character of our Master.” (106-107)

Well stated! Personally I have long held to the position that the fivefold ministries are for every believer – and the health of the church depends on us recognising this. This is also the point that Paul makes in Ephesians 4. Through the fivefold ministries of the church the church will grow up and become more and more like Jesus, as each part does its work. This is as true then as it is today. The book includes a Fivefold Ministries Questionnaire which will assist disciples to confirm which one of the fivefold ministries a believer might have as a *base gift*. You can also go to the 3DM website and download a PDF version:

www.weare3dm.com.

The pentagon is not just something you will find in Washington DC; the pentagon is in every church and every believer.



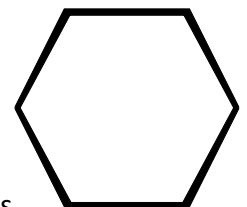
This is the point Breem and Cockburn make as they discuss the roles of all believers within the church.

The pentagon shape reminds us of the fivefold ministry described in Ephesians 4: 7-13. Traditionally these fivefold ministries have been understood to refer to the five roles for leaders in the church. Some maintain that one or more of these roles ended with the apostolic age. But the argument is made in *Building a Discipling Culture* that the fivefold ministries are for everyone. The authors sum up their argument by saying:

We are not all called to be pastors, but we are all called to care. We are not all called to be teachers, but we are all called to hold out the Truth. We are all responsible for learning how to listen for God’s voice, something that come more naturally

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In the final three chapters Breem and Cockburn discuss the discipleship factors of prayer (the hexagon), spiritual depth (the heptagon), and mission (the octagon). Each chapter goes into detail discussing the six, seven, or eight elements of each. The chapter on prayer elaborates on the Lord’s Prayer. Spiritual depth looks at the seven processes of life that identify all living organisms (movement, respiration, sensitivity, nutrition, growth, reproduction, excretion) and applies these to the signs of life in the kingdom of God. The final chapter, which deals with mission, describes the eight things we need to keep in mind as we reach out with the gospel. The authors admit (and I would agree) that “the eight principles of the Octagon provide a comprehensive but not an exhaustive approach to evangelism.” (155)



But if you look at the Octagon along with the other LifeShapes – you have an excellent teaching tool which will assist in the discipling process.

If you are looking for a book to guide you in making disciples and, more importantly, in building a discipling culture in your church – then this is an excellent resource and a valued addition to any library. This will be one book I will turn to repeatedly as I seek not only to be a disciple of Jesus, but also as I assist others to make disciples. It is packed with practical how-to's and raft with Biblical references. The authors practice what they write; they are committed to teach the truth as explained to us in Scripture. The Biblical examples, which litter every chapter, not only lends to the credibility of this book, but it provides many sermon texts which could be explored through a sermon series on discipleship or discussed in a small group Bible study. If anything, the case is made for the importance of discipleship. As Breem and Cockram remind us: "Remember, if the last words of Jesus are anything to go by, he is only counting disciples." (156)

