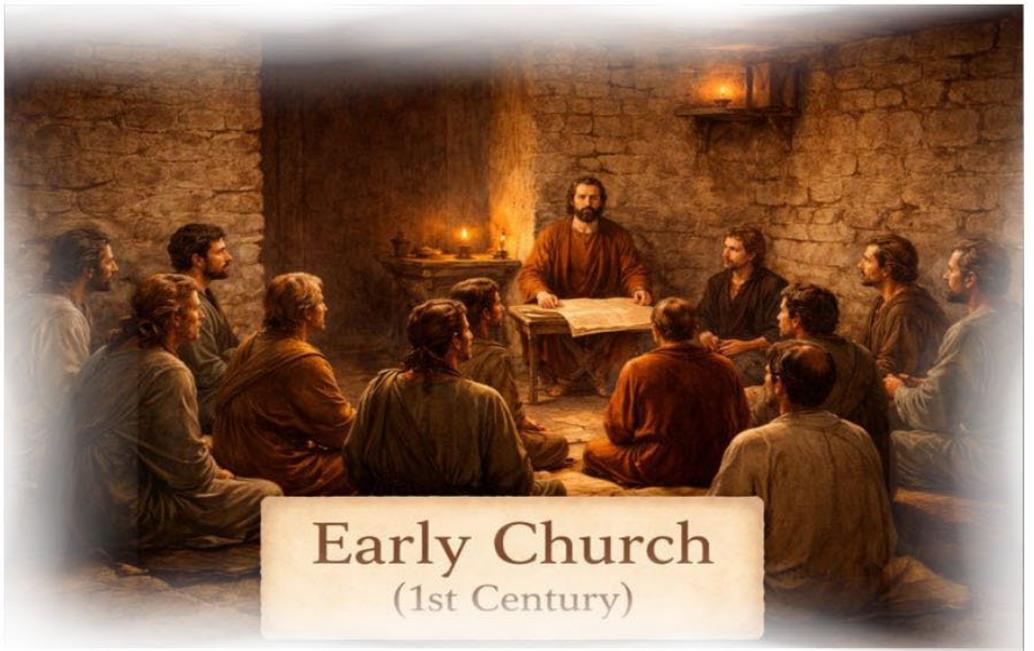


THE GREAT COMMISSION

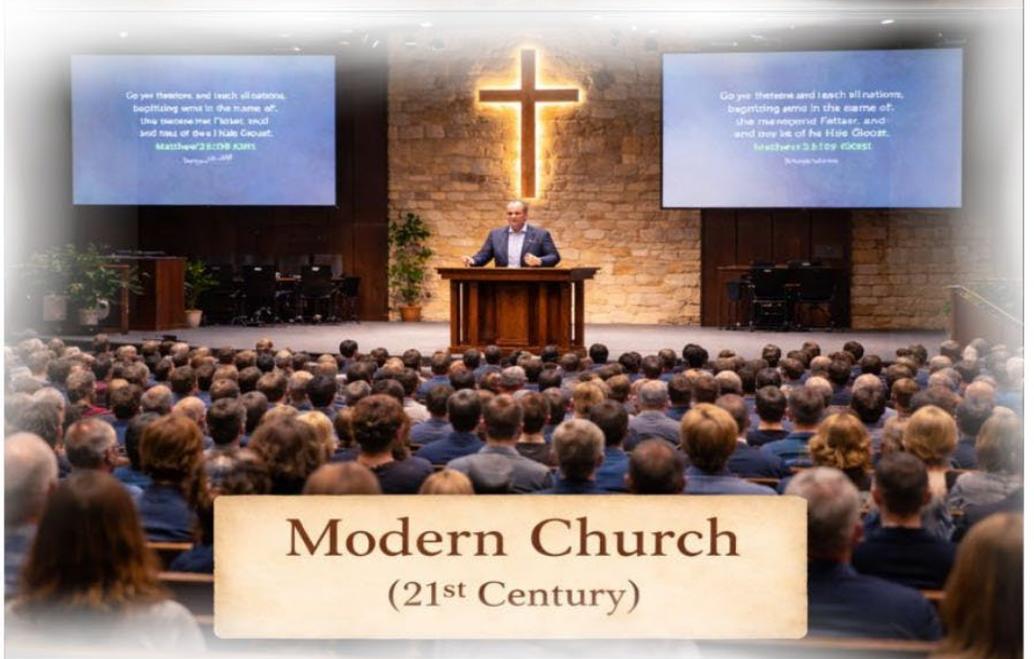
AND RESTORING DISCIPLESHIP



Early Church
(1st Century)



Medieval Church
(4th–15th Century)



Modern Church
(21st Century)

THE GREAT COMMISSION AND DISCIPLESHIP

How the Church Drifted from Disciple-Making and How We Can Return

When the LORD Jesus gave the Great Commission, His words were not vague. He did not say, “Go and build gatherings,” or “Go and maintain institutions.” He said, “Go...make disciples,” and then He described what discipleship looks like, teaching people to observe all things whatsoever He commanded. Evangelism is the doorway, but discipleship is the lifelong walk.

In the first century, discipleship was not a department of the church; it was the life of the church. New believers were immediately brought into instruction, fellowship, prayer, and obedience. They learned doctrine and learned endurance, because following Christ often came with a cost. The church multiplied because disciples were being formed, and formed disciples naturally helped form others.

In those earliest years, the church grew through personal teaching and shared life. Scripture was read, explained, and applied, often in homes and small gatherings. Leaders trained others to teach, also, because the work could not rest on one man. Discipleship was practical, relational, and anchored in the Word.

As time passed, persecution continued to test believers, but it also purified them. When Christianity was costly, the church had to produce real disciples, not merely religious attenders. The believers who endured did so because they had been grounded. They knew the LORD, and they knew His Word, and they knew why they believed.

Then came a turning point in history, especially after Constantine. The church moved from being persecuted to being recognized and favored, and that change brought both opportunity and danger. With state favor came

crowds, structure, and increasingly public religion. A church that once multiplied through discipleship now faced the temptation to measure success by numbers and visibility.

As the church became more institutional, discipleship began to shift away from life-on-life learning. Teaching became more formal, and spiritual growth was often connected to participation in church life rather than personal formation. Many sincere believers remained, and God always preserved a remnant. Yet the overall direction began to drift from the Great Commission's simplicity.

As centuries unfolded, theology became more systematized. Augustine influenced how many thought about sin, grace, and the church, and while he wrote profoundly on many matters, the church in general continued moving toward institutional strength. The more organized the church became, the easier it was for believers to rely on the institution to do what discipleship once did in the home and the heart. Over time, tradition could replace training.

During the medieval period, the church's reach expanded, but discipleship often suffered. In many places, Scripture was no longer openly accessible to ordinary people, and learning became concentrated in the hands of trained clergy. When the Word is not in the hands of the people, discipleship weakens. People may remain religious, but they cannot grow deep without the Scriptures shaping their minds and lives.

Still, even in those darker stretches, the LORD preserved men and women who hungered for truth. There were believers who pursued Christ, taught others, and held to Scripture as they had it. God never left Himself without a witness. But the broad stream of church life often became more about ritual than reproduction of disciples.

Then, in the LORD's timing, the Reformation brought a mighty recovery of Scripture to the people. When the Bible returned to open reading and

preaching, discipleship had new soil in which to grow. People could now learn directly from God's Word, not merely from tradition about it. This recovery did not solve everything, but it restored a central truth: God's people must be fed, taught, and equipped.

The generations that followed saw seasons of strong teaching and renewed evangelism. Wherever the Word was preached clearly, and believers were taught to understand it, discipleship flourished. Families learned Scripture. Churches trained believers. The gospel advanced because believers were grounded, and grounded believers are not easily moved.

In later centuries, revivals and awakenings stirred hearts toward Christ again. Many were converted, and many were strengthened, but revival alone cannot carry the church forward if discipleship does not follow. A harvest without follow-up leads to shallow roots. The church must always do both proclaim the gospel and teach believers to live it.

In time, the church in many places began to shift again, this time in a different way. As society modernized, schedules filled, and life sped up, churches adapted to new rhythms. Programs multiplied, ministries multiplied, and activity multiplied. Yet sometimes the very busyness of ministry crowded out the slow, steady work of making disciples.

This is not said to criticize pastors. Pastors carry burdens few people truly understand. They preach, counsel, visit, administer, and shepherd, often with little rest. Yet when the whole church depends on the pastor to do what the whole church is meant to do, discipleship suffers.

The Great Commission was given to the church, not to one man. In many churches, Sunday School became the primary place where teaching was expected to happen. Sunday School has done much good, and I thank the LORD for it. Yet in many cases, classes became talk-and-listen sessions

rather than true learning environments. People heard truth, but many were not trained to retain it, use it, and pass it on.

Speaking is not the same as teaching, and listening is not the same as learning. Learning is what remains in permanent memory and becomes usable in daily life. A believer who truly learns can explain what he believes, defend the faith, and guide another soul. That is what discipleship produces, and it is what our day is starving for.

Now we are living in a time when the church faces heavy winds. Confusion is everywhere, biblical illiteracy is growing, and many believers lack confidence in the Scriptures. The world is discipling people constantly through screens, voices, and influences. If the church does not disciple intentionally, the world will disciple automatically.

This is why I believe the LORD is calling His churches back, not backward, but forward to intentional discipleship. Not by tearing down faithful ministries, but by adding what is missing. Not by shaming pastors, but by strengthening them. Not by increasing activity, but by restoring purpose.

This is where Learning Centers come in. Learning Centers are not meant to compete with preaching or replace Sunday School. They are an option and an open door for those who hunger to go deeper. They are simple, flexible environments where believers are taught how to learn, how to study the Word, and how to disciple others.

A Learning Center does something many churches have not been structured to do. It turns willing believers into growing learners, and growing learners into capable disciplers. It trains people to hold truth in permanent memory and use it. It creates a place where questions are welcomed, Scripture is opened, and believers are equipped, not merely informed.

Learning Centers also lift a burden from pastors. They do not remove the pastor's calling to preach and shepherd, but they multiply his influence by equipping others. When believers learn deeply, they begin to help others. Multiplication begins quietly at first, then steadily, then powerfully.

This is why the three cover pictures matter. The early church picture reminds us that discipleship was once relational and intentional. The medieval institutional picture reminds us how easily structure can replace spiritual reproduction. The modern picture reminds us that our day needs more than services; it needs disciples who know the LORD and His Word. As I stand at what I now recognize as my "Caleb's Mountain," I do so with sobriety and hope. The task is great, but the LORD is greater. He has not abandoned His design for the church. He is still stirring hearts to return to the heart of His commission.

The question before us is not whether we need more programs. The question is whether we will obey Christ. Discipleship was never meant to be optional. It was meant to be the normal life of the church.

Why Discipleship Cannot Be Assumed

One of the great misunderstandings of our day is the assumption that discipleship will happen naturally if believers simply attend church long enough. Scripture never makes that assumption. Discipleship in the New Testament was always intentional, personal, and guided. Believers were taught, not merely exposed to truth.

A person can sit under sound preaching for years and still remain unsure how to study the Bible, explain the gospel clearly, or help another believer grow. This is not a failure of preaching; it is the result of discipleship being assumed rather than taught. Preaching proclaims truth. Discipleship trains believers to live it, guard it, and pass it on.

The apostle Paul understood this clearly when he wrote to Timothy, instructing him to entrust what he had learned “to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” That is not a one-step process; it is multiplication by design. Truth is received, learned, retained, and then transferred.

When discipleship is assumed, spiritual growth becomes uneven. Some believers grow deeply on their own, while others remain dependent and uncertain. But when discipleship is taught intentionally, growth becomes reproducible. Believers gain confidence, not arrogance; humility, not passivity; and a desire to help others, not merely to be helped.

This is why the church cannot afford to leave discipleship to chance. The Great Commission does not call us to hope disciples emerge, it commands us to make them.

Closing Prayer

May the LORD give pastors wisdom, courage, and strength. May He give church families hunger for truth and readiness to learn. And may He raise up Learning Centers wherever hearts are willing, so believers become disciples, and disciples become disciplers until Jesus comes.

Dave Weeks

[Learning Center Ministries](#)Commission