



**THE  
FALSE**

**PROMISE**

**OF DISCIPLESHIP**

**Rescuing Discipleship from the American  
Gospel by Asking the Right Questions**

**BILL HULL AND BRANDON COOK**  
*FOREWORD BY BOBBY HARRINGTON*



*The False Promise of Discipleship*

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# 1

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## OUR WAY VS. JESUS' WAY OF MAKING DISCIPLES

*Introducing the False Promise*

*"I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people?"*

*—Jeremiah 8:21-22*

**Imagine if Jesus had spent all of his time planning a big banquet.**

He gets baptized in the Jordan River and then retreats back up to Galilee, puts a deposit down on a huge venue, and prepares to put on a killer party. No need for deejays to get the party started. The man makes a world-class wine.

Then the big night comes, and Jesus waits: eager, excited, his foot tapping nervously on the floor. But by 8 p.m., only a few people have shown up. He makes do. At least the sparse crowd enjoyed the wine (*what on earth was that vintage?*). The next week, Jesus tries the whole thing again, hoping for a better turnout. This time he brings in a band. But once again, the numbers are low.

Not one to give up, he tries it again, adding dry ice and a fog machine (the ancient equivalent, anyway). He continues to attempt a bigger and better party.

Kind of a crazy scenario, right? But when you think about it, for the last 50 years, the American church has been doing the same thing, with fewer and fewer people showing up for the party. Even when attracting people *has* worked to bring people to a local church, we haven't consistently created Christlike disciples and disciple makers. The harder we try, the further behind we get. The cultural landscape is shifting so rapidly and substantially that the strategies are outdated before we even get out of the gate. Trying to build church programs and having a slick show may still "work" in some parts of the United States, but increasingly, the impact of the attractional model is more like, "Turn out the lights; the party's over."

Bottom line: *The church as we've known it is dying. What will be resurrected in its place?*

## **We Need a New Movement**

Of course, we know that Jesus did *not* focus on putting on a slick, attractive show.

He didn't throw a big party (although he did crash a few). Instead, he spent the vast majority of his time with a few individuals. Looking at his life in the Gospels, we can clearly see that Jesus

zeroed in on making disciples, not on throwing parties. We can all give thanks for the growing awareness and conviction that disciple-making—following Jesus and learning to live and love like Jesus—is our work too. *Disciple-making is the hope for the church's future.* As author and 3DM leader Mike Breen has said, “If you make disciples, you will always get the church, but if you make the church, you won’t always get disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

In Luke’s Gospel, we read Jesus’ words to the crowd that had gathered: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it” (Luke 9:23-25).

When we follow his plan, everything gets done just right. We can all greet the discipleship renaissance with hope. It is a breath of fresh air. It is a commitment that teems with possibilities.

Yet at the same time, *we are writing this book because we have major problems with discipleship—at least as we understand it.*

I (Brandon) grew up in the church and walked through a string of discipleship programs. Usually, they involved reading the Bible and talking about whatever I (or we, depending on who was in the group) was struggling with. The assumption seemed to be that if we just read more and tried harder, we could get ourselves in order and live real, effective lives for Jesus. There was value in that thought, for sure. But I always left each program with

the feeling that I wasn't quite "there," that I simply needed to try harder, that there was some special place of arrival just around the corner if I did things the right way.

Ultimately, I ended up resenting the entire process because I could never get "there." I've discovered that most people approach God the same way, thinking that all they need to do is earn their way toward him, and then they end up frustrated by the entire process. Sure, everyone talks about grace when it comes to getting our sins forgiven and going to heaven, but almost immediately we separate that grace from the rest of our lives and start striving on our own to get to a new level with God. I've watched many of my peers leave the church entirely.

What's happening? Bill and I believe we're losing a generation because, at the root, *we've not taught discipleship as Jesus taught it.*

In fact, for many people these days, committing to "discipleship" may not actually mean much. The word has so many meanings—much like the word "Christian" (just notice how *that* word is wielded in media and popular use). We can't assume we know what any one person means when they say discipleship. As I (Bill) often say, we may be using the same words, but we are speaking a different language.

Is discipleship mentoring? Is it meeting regularly with someone or with a few someones? Maybe, maybe not. It all depends on what's happening (the content) during that time. Discipleship probably

*includes* mentoring, but mentoring is not sufficient in and of itself to constitute discipleship. Or is discipleship teaching people to read Scripture and to talk about what they're struggling with? That is, is it Bible reading with some accountability thrown in?

Again, discipleship no doubt includes Scripture reading as well as honestly sharing our lives with one another. But is that how Jesus spent all of his time with the disciples—reading Scripture and asking them to tell him what they struggled with during the past week? Clearly, we don't have a lot of clarity about what discipleship is (and isn't). Moreover, our ways and means of making disciples may have little resemblance to how Jesus made disciples. To some degree, it makes sense—given we live in a completely different context absent of itinerant teachers who travel the countryside. And yet, *might there be something fundamentally askew about our baseline assumptions of what discipleship is?* Our problems, after all, aren't usually caused by what we know but just the opposite: what we *don't know*.

This book examines why discipleship, so called, so often fails and to explore what's required to restore potency and power to discipleship within our churches. Ultimately, it's about what we need to do in order to see towns and cities renewed, and the world to find hope in the living God.

It's like building and moving into a new house. You lay the foundation first, clearing away rubble, making a sure start. Then you raise the actual structure. It takes a lot of work, but oh boy, when



you're done, holy Toledo! A veritable castle. You move in, excited for a new beginning. But over time, you notice that something's wrong. Your glass of orange juice starts sliding across the kitchen table. One day you notice that the living room floor dips in the middle. The corners of the bedroom are no longer flush. The siding is askew.

Naturally, you call in a carpenter, and then an engineer, eager to learn what has gone wrong. You soon discover the problem, and it's a doozy: you've built the entire structure on a rotten foundation. You think back, and truth be told, you *do* remember wondering if everything had been made level, if everything had been allowed to settle. But you were just so excited to get on with it and build the house. The extra work seemed like a waste of time. *Everything would probably be fine.* Or so you thought. Now, as you look at your house, which is quickly losing integrity, you realize that you'll either need to put some major work into overhauling and rehabbing the whole thing, or you'll just have to start from scratch, razing everything down to the foundation and beginning again.

Is it possible that our foundation for discipleship could be wonky? Is it possible that it might be off in some way, perhaps significantly? Jesus warned us, after all, about building our house on sand rather than on rock (Matt. 7:24-27). Of course, he was talking about building a life on him, but the metaphor holds true for whatever endeavor we set our hearts and hands to.

Could it be that too often we've built our discipleship on sandy beaches?

## The False Promise

The false promise of discipleship deals with the premise that *discipleship is about a disciple getting closer and closer to Jesus*. The false promise of discipleship, simply, is the belief that discipleship is about ascending a ladder to get close to God.

Isn't being close to Jesus a great thing? Of course, it is! But here's the rub: a close relationship with Jesus is not the *end goal of discipleship*. Most people, quite simply, have been trained to think that discipleship is "for me":

- *It's about me growing closer to Jesus.*
- *It's about me becoming a better person and a better Christian.*
- *It's about me feeling like I know God more.*

All of these things are good. But this type of self-focused discipleship is exactly what has to shift. This myopic view is why maturity—which isn't even the type of maturity that Jesus desires for us—never happens. Whatever the paradigm for discipleship, if it's primarily about you and it's primarily asking the question, "How am I doing?" it's doomed to fall back to earth. We're left staring up at the heavens, knowing that surely there is soaring yet to be done but not quite sure how to get there above the clouds.

The soaring life that Jesus invites us into is, quite simply, *a life lived for others*. Contrary to what we've been taught or may have taught (or are currently teaching), discipleship is always, unceasingly about loving “the other”—which is God and other people. But in our discipleship efforts today, we've often stopped short of this. Being close to Jesus is part of the journey but not the only end goal. As God himself said to his people in Isaiah 58 (summarizing in our own words here): *If you'll focus on others, if you'll focus on rebuilding the broken places for others, if you'll focus on bringing light into the darkness, for others, then your salvation will break forth like the dawn!*<sup>2</sup>

Wasn't this Jesus' constant work? To provoke his disciples into loving and serving others, since he himself came “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45)? Before Jesus fed the 5,000, he turned to his disciples and said, “*You give them something to eat*” (Matt. 14:16, ESV). He constantly challenged his disciples to love, serve, feed, and proclaim life to others. He said that the whole law and prophets—the whole story of God!—is about loving God with everything you have *and* “*your neighbor as yourself*” (Matt. 22:39).

Don't miss this: *Reorienting your life to loving, knowing, and serving others is both the heart of true discipleship and also the endpoint of discipleship.*

Yet, sadly, the church has not often adopted Jesus' ways and means toward this end—teaching his disciples to orient their life and energy around serving others. When it has, it feels more like

an activity we're supposed to fit into crowded schedules rather than a lifestyle of adventure, teeming with possibilities, where the kingdom of God could burst forth at any moment. Sadly, we have often preferred to put on banquets, hoping people will like us, or outreach events, hoping that they will be curious about us. Good intentions, no doubt. But events and programs are simply not the path that leads to cultivating a vibrant church built on a movement of disciple-making disciples.

Through the course of this short book, we discuss specific steps toward a Jesus-centered, others-focused discipleship. But first, we need to explore why discipleship as it now stands—generally built on the question, “How am I doing?”—is so prevalent, and why true, Jesus-centered discipleship is often so elusive.

As with the call to the carpenter and the engineer, maybe we first need to put on our hard hats and take a good look at our foundations for life.