

Introduction

*“For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth
to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”*

2 Chron. 16:9

My good friend Tom was at the end of his rope. He had tried almost everything to light a fire under his congregation. But after seven challenging years, he found himself tired, discouraged, and sure of only one thing—that his job security was hanging by a thread

Let me back up and tell you his story. Before he arrived, Tom had met with the church leaders and gotten the lay of the land. At that time, he was convinced that the congregation was ripe for a genuine overhaul: he envisioned leading his flock to a renewed commitment to God and a genuine enthusiasm for the Great Commission—going and making disciples everywhere (Matt. 28:18-20). In short order, though, he saw that the mindset of the majority was intent upon maintaining the status quo and caring for those safely within the walls of the church.

Tom, ever the optimist, was not deterred. With patience and an eagerness to learn, he began to hunt for the keys to cultivating a faithful church. One question brought focus to his search: What could he do to promote and foster a change in the church’s values and priorities—its culture—so that the members would willingly stop “doing” church and start “being” a church which took seriously the biblical call to make disciples of all nations?

Tom left no stone unturned in his single-minded pursuit to find the best strategies and programs to spur faithfulness among his church’s people. He prayed fervently, read scores of relevant books, and sought out dozens of seasoned Christian leaders. With teams of laity, he attended conferences to glean the best practices designed to heighten

a church's spiritual health and vibrancy. He deliberately zeroed in on his church leaders, seeking to inspire in them a sense of urgency for ministry to the surrounding community.

But that's not all. Tom paved the way for small group ministry to occur. He worked with a team to overhaul his church's worship style, seeking to make it relevant and inviting to the unchurched. He championed a spiritual gifts ministry which empowered lay people to step out in faith and use the spiritual talents God gave them. Tom invested himself in training ministry leaders so that they, in turn, could train others. Finally, Tom made sure that the nurture which members received from Bible study also equipped them to share the gospel with those who were hurting and lost.

So, what was the combined result of his dedication and energy? As you might have guessed from the opening, a congregation that remained mired in its past and a deeply troubled pastor.

My Parallel Journey

During the same seven years, I was on staff at a nearby church. My experience was very different than Tom's; my church community was vibrant, innovative, and rapidly growing. Nonetheless, I was grappling with the same types of questions that Tom was seeking to answer:

How can today's churches sustain the same transforming power of the Holy Spirit that was clearly evident in the earliest Christian congregations? In other words, what fuels the movement of the Holy Spirit among God's gathered people? Why are some churches on fire while others are stone cold? And what—if anything—can faithful leaders do to turn their dying or stagnant churches around?

Why would I bother with these issues? Didn't my church have a lock on the right "formula"? Actually, the challenge I saw was not so much to light a congregational fire but to keep the flame burning. I wanted to avoid the complacency that usually comes with success.

What I Learned along the Way

So began my quest, and fortunately, I found and gleaned a wealth of wisdom from many excellent Christian resources focusing on congregational transformation and vitality. [1] I also benefited from delving into the recent writings of behavioral science, particularly the study of organizational development—the planned process of change within an organization's culture. [2] As a former instructor at a nearby college, I had taught on the subject of organizational behavior, making me even more aware of the human dynamics of the Church. Finally, my unusual combination of work experiences—serving as president of a multi-million-dollar business as well as pastoring within several large churches—has shown me the value of integrating the truths of social science and God's Word.

So...what did I learn along the way? First, I learned that the laity must be empowered to do ministry if a dynamic system like the Church wants to be effective in a rapidly changing world. Second, I observed that teamwork is a key value and critically important to success—no surprise there! Third, I have become convinced that churches need to adapt in order to communicate their core beliefs in relevant ways for new generations of members. Finally, I have come to appreciate the need for organizational leaders—church leaders included—to be highly intentional and focused in how they form a collective identity and establish a clear direction.

Even after gathering all these pearls of wisdom and experience, though, my basic questions remained unanswered. I clearly saw that the key to congregational

transformation and vitality was not found in implementing ministry programs or in mastering behavioral theory. And so, I felt compelled to dig deeper and find a biblical model that adequately explains the transformational work of the Holy Spirit in the local church. So, my quest has led me to craft my own convictions about the most basic starting point of spiritual transformation within the church. The result of my effort is contained in the pages of this book.

The Power of a Metaphor

Actually, I suppose my search began twenty years ago when I first picked up Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline. [3] The opening chapter of his great book clicked on the lights for me—an “Aha!” experience—and planted the seeds which have since germinated as my current understanding of God's work in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Though I was somewhat familiar with “spiritual disciplines,” Foster's words, combined with my readiness to soak in their meaning, dramatically fueled my understanding of spiritual transformation and the vital role that the disciplines play in this process.

Using a great analogy, Foster describes the farmer who tills, sows, waters, and weeds in order to cultivate and promote a bountiful crop. Although the farmer's efforts make a real difference, ultimately God grows the plants. The farmer's discipline, though important and critical, is secondary to the renewing work of the Creator. Foster suggests that disciplines such as study, prayer, worship, fellowship, serving, and generosity do not directly cause the believer to grow spiritually, but they create an environment in which God's powerful Spirit can effectively work in ready, receptive lives.

Practicing these “spiritual habits”—and Foster describes twelve in depth—keeps our hearts open to what God is seeking to accomplish in and through us. Thus, personal spiritual transformation—the essence of discipleship—is a process, combining the life-

changing work of the Spirit and the ongoing faithfulness of disciples. What a difference this helpful analogy has made in my understanding!

Several years ago, I was trying to explain the Church and the nature of congregational renewal and faithfulness to a group from a nearby church. I was struggling to find the right analogy when another light bulb went on. In an instant, a crystal-clear image flashed in my brain—my own walk of faith, namely discipleship. The Church is like me! Or am I like the Church? If spiritual disciplines plainly exist that help me grow in my own faithfulness, why wouldn't disciplines for our communal growth as a church body also exist? It was at this point that I realized that the dynamics and dimensions of church transformation draw a close parallel to personal discipleship.

Since that day, I have been exploring this concept of “congregational discipleship” through study, reflection, teaching, and dialogue. The more I focus on this area of study, the more convinced I become that both types of discipleship—personal and corporate—are taught in the Scriptures and are equally relevant for the Body of Christ in today's world. Am I still learning about this subject? I always will be. As I go along, I look forward to the insightful feedback of readers.

A New Paradigm for Church Renewal

Tom and I, through different paths, have arrived at the same conclusion: the absolute, nonnegotiable starting point for ongoing congregational transformation and vitality is when a church collectively responds in an authentically heartfelt way to Jesus' invitation to deny itself and follow Him. Inevitably, a genuine change of congregational values and priorities occurs: the people of God learn to exchange a self-centered world for one where Christ and kingdom values are prioritized. This gradual process of transformation within the very heart of the church is what I call congregational discipleship and draws a close parallel to our own journey of faith.

In other words, congregational vitality is not about getting people to show up; it is insuring that God shows up. Growing a church numerically is relatively easy: secure an excellent communicator; add sacred music that is attractive to the intended audience, and sprinkle in relevant children's and student ministry. In due time, a crowd will arrive! Insuring that God shows up is a completely different issue, and only one highly challenging pathway exists, namely obedience. By obedience, I mean letting go of our personal preferences and embracing a commitment to Christ's missional agenda, and when we do so, we invite God to take over and reign among us. The heart of the matter is simply this: programs attract people, and obedience attracts God. And if God shows up in your church, expect His friends!

Don't misunderstand me. I am not at all discounting the value of knowing and implementing change management principles in the church or the worth of understanding behavioral science truths. The contributions of multiple authors in these areas are significant. Nor do I discount the value of undertaking ministry programs that may provide practical help for disciples. Each of these strategies, however, is secondary when it comes to initiating and sustaining a spiritual transformation process within a church.

The bottom line of congregational discipleship lies in one crucial issue, and any church that yearns to experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit must continually ask itself a profoundly simple question: Is Jesus indeed Lord and Head of the church, or are the members? When Jesus is increasingly the center of the church—when Jesus is rightly sitting on the throne in the eyes and hearts of a congregation—the movement of the Spirit is strong, the power of sinful addictions are broken over time, and God's grace is evident to all. At that point, no church leaders, pastors, or laity will have to wonder what to "do" to be a faithful church; Spirit-supplied vitality will ooze out of the pores of that community of disciples.

So let me tie my discipleship strands together. Discipleship has two distinct facets, combining both what I do and what we do collectively. Discipleship is personal—focusing on transforming me into a faithful follower of Christ, and congregational—focusing on transforming us. Are these two types of discipleship related? Yes, and if you understand one, the other is much easier to grasp.

A Quick Overview

The easiest way for me to provide a quick and effective overview of this book is to discuss its three main sections using a “3-D” approach. Those three d’s—*discipleship, dimensions, and disciplines*—are the key concepts that we will explore and grasp together. So here goes:

Part One: Chapters One and Two are a quick review of the basics of spiritual transformation and how it relates to faithful *discipleship*. Chapter One begins with a visual model that many of my students have found helpful along with a distinctive definition of discipleship that will serve as a common thread throughout the text. Chapter Two reveals how this 2-step paradigm of transformation is visible throughout the pages of Scripture as well as our surrounding world. Together, these chapters provide a quick review of common knowledge—the nature of our own discipleship—which will in turn become the foundation for grasping a concept rarely articulated or understood: the spiritual dynamics of congregational transformation.

Part Two: Chapters Three through Seven outline the five (5) *dimensions* of congregational discipleship. Chapter Three underscores that personal discipleship is *ongoing*—it is neither a dated event nor a one-time experience. Rather, discipleship is a never-ending process of transformation that calls us, on a daily basis, to die to self and live for God. For the Church, discipleship is no different. Faithfulness together can never be construed as merely an event or an experience. If so, the apostles would have had

every right to sit on their laurels after Pentecost, the kingpin of mountaintop experiences for Christ's Church. The idea of complacency never entered the apostles' minds. They knew that the arrival of the Spirit was only the beginning, not the end. The Church is called to be in process—taking next steps of faith—in an ever-changing world.

Chapter Four establishes that discipleship is also a unique process that is *relative* to where you have been, who you are, and where you are called to go. Never a series of predetermined and sequential steps or a straight path with a common starting point for all believers, discipleship is a jagged and twisted road with multiple dead-end loops. Your own journey is as unique as your thumbprint. Churches, like individual disciples, are also called to honor God based on who they are and where they are placed to serve. Congregations are well advised to compare their faithfulness to their own history and to biblical mandates rather than compare themselves to other churches.

Chapter Five confirms that discipleship is *purposeful* and has clear objectives--we are called both to *be* and *do*. First, we are called to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength: this is being. Simultaneously, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and use our giftedness to make disciples: this is doing. The purpose of the Church is different, but related to, my own call to be and do. To explain the distinctions, I will highlight Paul's three-pronged strategy for creating faithful churches—invite...grow...send. Paul began new churches by 1) proclaiming the Good News and *inviting* his audience to respond, 2) *growing* responsive followers as capable servants and 3) empowering these believers by *sending* them to be ambassadors for Christ within the context of their spiritual gifts, passions and spheres of influence. As you will see, invite...grow...send is nothing more than a process to help individual disciples be and do.

Chapter Six details the *contentious* nature of discipleship—the inherent conflict between two kingdoms and their opposing values. We are called to live in one world and be of another. Predictably, we are surrounded with strife. If our own experience of faith is a struggle, why should the larger Body of Christ be any different? To make matters worse, church conflicts are very visible, not merely an internal stew of tension simmering just inside our souls. If you have ever refereed a discussion between church members with differing mindsets—those who prioritize caring for existing church members vs. those who prioritize reaching the lost (just an example, mind you!)—you know what I am talking about! Each group naturally competes for the supremacy of its particular values.

Chapter Seven concludes this section by outlining the *cooperative* dimension of discipleship. In other words, personal faithfulness occurs when God’s transformational power is combined with our human discipline and the time-tested habits such as prayer, study, worship, fellowship, generosity and service. As a result, spiritual vitality is neither a function of our own hard work nor the dominating influence of God. It is somewhere in between, a cooperative process. In like fashion, I will suggest that spiritual disciplines also exist for the local church—“congregational disciplines”—formative activities that foster spiritual faithfulness. I subdivide the congregational “spiritual habits” into three categories: 1) *cornerstone disciplines* which help to secure Jesus’ place as the Head of the church; 2) *ministry disciplines* which help to establish His methods as the process for disciple-making and 3) *support disciplines* which help to supply the essential resources that equipped servants need.

Part Three: The book’s last section greatly expands upon these three categories of ***congregational disciplines***. Chapter Eight details the three *cornerstone disciplines*. Together, they help to secure Christ’s authority as Head of the church and affirm His universal mandate to make disciples. These disciplines also enable the church to claim

its unique, God-inspired vision. Specifically, this section explains how, when properly exercised, the cornerstone disciplines work:

- *Cornerstone discernment* is a powerful means to encourage a church's core disciples to exchange a member-centered definition of congregational life for a Christ-centered paradigm that is grounded in the Great Commission. When the church's core disciples defines its cornerstone--as expressed through values, beliefs, vision, and mission—the stage is then set for building His kingdom, fostering humble servants, and releasing the power of God's Spirit.
- *Leadership alignment* is a powerful means to encourage a church's core disciples to exchange their cultural-based methods of governance for a biblically-based community that prioritizes Jesus' disciple-making methods as defined by a shared cornerstone. When a church's leadership is united and aligned to common kingdom principles, the Spirit is given permission to accomplish more than humans can imagine.
- *Vision casting* is a powerful means to encourage the entire church to exchange its comfortable and self-fulfilling expectations for a lifestyle that is characterized by an urgent passion for the hurting and lost. If we love Christ, we collectively follow His Great Commission, disciple-making path and the Spirit empowers our every step of faith.

Chapter Nine details the three *ministry disciplines*. Together, they help to establish Jesus' disciple-making strategy as the norm for all ministries in concert with the church's God-centered cornerstone. Specifically, this section explains how, when properly exercised, the ministry disciplines work:

- *Relevant worship* is a powerful means to encourage a church to exchange its preoccupation with traditional forms for an approach that effectively communicate a timeless Gospel to those in and beyond its walls. The resulting environment sets the stage for the movement of God's Spirit that can be felt and sensed by the invited guests of regular participants. And it leaves them hungry for more.

- *Spiritual formation* is a powerful means to encourage a church to exchange its own notions of truth for a world where the God-inspired Scriptures is the manual for daily living. As the church collectively complies with the commands of Christ, God honors this faithful obedience by sending the Spirit to be present, show the way, and empower the journey.
- *Lay mobilization* is a powerful means to encourage a church to exchange its consumer-driven expectation to be nurtured by the church's staff for a humble desire to be an instrument of change destined to make an eternal difference. With submission to a God-inspired vision for service to the world, church members experience the Spirit's power moving in and through them to accomplish more for the kingdom than they could ever have imagined.

Chapter Ten details the three *support disciplines*. Together, they help to supply ministry servants with needed resources through a relevant and appropriate infrastructure.

Specifically, this section explains how, when properly exercised, the support disciplines work:

- *Empowering systems* is a powerful means to encourage a church to exchange obsolete management strategies that promote control for streamlined ministry systems that help a church maximize its missional purpose. Well-crafted management guidelines for church life provide freedom for the Spirit's winds to blow in and through the church's people to accomplish great things for God.
- *Aligned facilities* is a powerful means to encourage church members to exchange a worldly mindset that church property is theirs for a biblical mindset that God is the rightful owner of all things. Once again, when faithful followers let God be God, the wind of the Spirit is at their backs and not in their faces.
- *Generous stewardship* is a powerful means to encourage a church to exchange the obligation of paying "club dues" for the joy of sharing God's

blessings in order to make disciples of all nations. Congregational generosity is a common indicator of the presence of God's Spirit and is visible witness to a world yearning for meaning and significance.

Clearly, many ministry initiatives exist which foster spiritual growth within a congregation, and my listing of congregational disciplines should not be taken as exhaustive. Also, let me repeat that these habits do not make a congregation vital and alive in the same way that the farmer does not make the corn grow. Rather, these activities till the soil of our collective hearts and encourage a readiness to cooperate with the Spirit's ongoing work in our lives.

Apart from God's Spirit, a church—as well as the individual disciple—is impotent to let go of the world's values and embrace kingdom values. Following Christ demands a radical change of culture indeed. Congregational disciplines of the Church, therefore, help to create an environment in which the Spirit can more readily accomplish this needed transformation.

My Hopes for the Reader

I have always been motivated by hope! Here's what I hope will come about as this book is read and shared among God's faithful people:

First, I hope that as church leaders work through the book together, they will more clearly grasp that the primary issues of congregational faithfulness are always spiritual. Programs and theories have their place and role, but the collective attitude of our hearts towards Christ is the nonnegotiable starting point, and discipleship is a transferable and biblical model that clearly communicates this key truth.

Second, I hope that readers will find the book concise without being simplistic. As a teacher and author, I strive to make complex matters understandable.

Third, I hope that the text will help readers to better understand the nature of spiritual transformation both for themselves and the Church.

Fourth, I hope that readers will more clearly understand what a faithful congregation looks and feels like. Unfortunately, many Christians have never tasted the saltiness of a Great Commission-focused church that has prioritized the discipleship of the world.

Fifth, I hope that my thoughts will instill in both congregations and individual disciples the desire to discern and take their next steps of faith. I have been blessed beyond measure by so many great Christian authors and teachers, and their insights have shaped the course of my own journey. I can only hope to be used by the Spirit to do the same for others.

So there you have it: an easy-to-remember 3-D model—discipleship, dimensions, and disciplines—reveals the nature of personal transformation and the process of revitalizing the heart of your church. You'll learn about yourself and Christ's church at the same time! My prayers are with you as you proceed.