

Lecture Unit 1 David Kueker “Four Systemic Problems in Disciple Making”

As we move toward the new and very different world of the cell church, it's worth examining some negative trends in the old world that we are temporarily leaving behind. I'd like to talk about four systemic problems that I've observed which I believe actively inhibit disciple making.¹ Systems exist to prevent trends of change and keep everything functioning smoothly in repeating cycles.² It has become normal for traditional church systems to avoid disciple making and resist any sort of organizational change that would change that reality.³

Systemic Problem #1. NOT MAKING DISCIPLES

Counting creates accountability. An active factory making a product generates inventory that can be counted in the warehouse. A healthy herd of sheep generates lambs that can be counted in the sheepfold. A healthy denomination making disciples generates converts that can be counted in each congregation. When the numbers are not there, the activity is not happening. The numbers indicate that what is being done in the churches does not result in sufficient numbers of countable converts to create positive growth. It is our goal that we make disciples; it is our current reality that we do not make disciples. Why?

Perhaps we do not know how to make disciples. The general response of clergy to the question of how one makes disciples is that "if people come to worship they eventually become disciples." This view indicates disciple-making as an event, an accidental result due to unknown causes, a mysterious act of God, rather than an intentional process. Churches are busy with many activities that may be very spiritually satisfying but do not make disciples that can be counted; these religious activities rarely interest and involve non-Christians. Based on what churches actually do, the common belief is that proclamation makes disciples, that church buildings make disciples, that worship makes disciples, that advertising makes disciples, that an attractive church bulletin makes disciples, that a busy church program makes disciples, that church committees make disciples and that acts of mercy, justice and community service make disciples. The numbers indicate that these practices do not make disciples. Working harder at what does not work and avoiding opportunities to study what does work allows systems to remain the same.

When disciple making is made the central priority and we seriously begin to move toward that goal, something causes us to veer off in one direction or another with the result that there are no new disciples. Systems always resist any change that will actually result in something changing; if the system can get the church off track in any other direction, the threat to the status

¹ I discuss these four systemic problems in detail in *Chapter One: Systemic Problems* at www.disciplewalk.com/Resources, pp. 5-35.

²The ways that systems prevent change are discussed at www.disciplewalk.com/Resources in Module One of Seminar One, all of Seminar Two and pp. 1-5 of Chapter Two. Visual parables on this topic are available at www.disciplewalk.com/parable_light_bulb_2.html and www.disciplewalk.com/parable_stainless_steel_church.html.

³Church historian Ernst Troeltsch used the Hegelian dialectic to describe a two-hundred-year cycle of innovative sects (antithesis) becoming change resistant, traditional churches (thesis/synthesis) that function as institutions. Elmer Towns, *Is The Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1973), under <http://www.elmertowns.com/index.cfm?action=bksonline>, 60-78.

quo ends. When an institutional system enthusiastically embraces changes in disciple making, one can be certain that the proposed change has been somehow compromised so that no change will actually occur. One way for systems to ease tension and maintain homeostasis is to speak loudly in favor of change while doing nothing that would actually result in change.

Systemic Problem #2. INSTITUTIONAL WORLD VIEW

One form this systemic avoidance can take is to attempt to do the Lord's work in *two steps* of innovation rather than one step of direct obedience; what we often forget is that you cannot cross a chasm in two steps. Here's a widespread example of what is commonly believed: *Bishop Kenneth Carder, who leads the church's Mississippi Area, shared with members of the Board of Discipleship the story of a once-prominent, 100-year-old United Methodist Church in his state. The church had dwindled in size from 1,000 to 17 members, despite its location in a neighborhood full of people and in a town with a population of 50,000. Now it was closing. Noting that the church used official United Methodist resources, rituals and curriculum, had won an award for evangelism and was Methodist to the core, the bishop wondered why it was closing and what it had missed. The answer, he said, was that the church was in a neighborhood in transition and had not reached out to the people around it.*⁴

The commandment from the Lord Jesus is very specific: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:30). The systemic problem in this statement is very subtle and very common, and involves the choice to love the neighborhood around the church building rather than the neighbors around the Christian. This is *two step* obedience: we create an institution, and delegate the task of fulfilling the commandment to it, thereby relieving ourselves of any personal obligation of obedience. Jesus said, rather, that each Christian is to love his or her neighbor where they live, not the neighborhood around the church building; the response of the traditional church system is, to paraphrase Ebenezer Scrooge, "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses? Are the institutions I support still at work?" We ignore our own neighbors that God commands us to love; instead of obeying God, we create and support an institution, the church, and delegate to this institution the task which God gave to us as individuals.⁵ Institutions are not very good at loving people, particularly outsiders. Church systems also avoid disciple making by attempting to create a disciple making institution and delegating the fulfillment of the Great Commission to that institution. Institutions do not make disciples; discipleship systems do.

⁴United Methodist News Service, "Making disciples means changing hearts, bishop says," <http://www.wfn.org/2002/03/msg00205.html> (accessed June 15, 2007). Bishop Carder's speech is referenced in the *United Methodist Newscope* vol 30, no 13, March 29, 2002.

⁵Jesus describes this problem in Mark 7:6-13 where financially supporting the Temple was believed to relieve individuals of the obligation to obey a commandment directly: *And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'; but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do."* Many such things do we also.

Another common practice is attempting to change or update the institutional church so that it becomes a disciple making institution. Many approaches to change involve redecorating the surface of institutions with a veneer of postmodern innovation, similar to creating a sports car powered by a steam engine; below the surface, nothing significant has changed. An institutional world view leads churches today to attempt to attract a generation that rejects institutions by creating an oxymoron, a “hip institution.”⁶ Whether one calls it a “missional church” or an “emergent church,” the institutional church cannot fulfill the commands of God, including the Great Commission; these tasks are given to each Christian. Massive amounts of energy are devoted to changing institutions so that institutions can make disciples; only sheep make sheep.

Systemic Problem #3: PRAIRIE DNA

DNA is inherited from one generation to the next. Cultural DNA is information which defines norms and homeostasis for systems. Traditions that used to work persist in systems; the system avoids what will work in favor of tinkering with its own tradition. Tradition, however, is what is left after what originally caused it to be successful has been removed or the world has changed so that it no longer works. Methodists simultaneously built churches and communities in a rural wilderness that no longer exists. It is very difficult to move away from our addiction to our own historic model.⁷ When we create new faith communities or attempt to make disciples in existing churches, we can naturally and unintentionally repeat our tradition and history without conscious awareness. It’s true: *The more things change, the more everything remains the same.*

The traditional, cultural system I call “Prairie DNA” evolved in the Methodist churches on the mid-western prairies during the 19th century and has at least eleven common characteristics. First, Prairie DNA operates the church as a “come structure” focused on attraction. Second, Prairie DNA has an institutional world view focused on the church building as the place for people to come. Third, it uses events to draw people to the building. Fourth, it seeks to be visible within the community by promoting these events. Fifth, it lowers barriers in an attempt to make the institution more attractive to outsiders. Sixth, Prairie churches experience community in conversations before and after worship and other events. These practices all reflect the customs of the camp meeting era when rural isolation drove people to worship events in order to meet human needs for socialization.

In this traditional, cultural system, “church” means “worship service” and it is difficult for people to conceive of a church that does not revolve around the weekly worship event. The traditional church attempts to solve every human need and desire through the worship event. The need for evangelism is expressed as a “need to reverse declining trends in worship attendance.” Disciple making is “two stepped” into (1) getting secular people into religious worship events where (2) they can become disciples. Evangelism is primarily perceived as “radical hospitality” where we invite strangers and help them enjoy our worship event. Church planting is perceived as successful when an ongoing, sustainable worship event is achieved. Often the discipleship system is little more than conversations before and after worship. We sincerely believe that all

⁶This strategy is perfectly satirized as “Catholicism Wow!” in Kevin Smith’s film, *Dogma*. Repent!

⁷For a full historic treatment of this syndrome as it evolved, see Chapter One: Systemic Problems at www.disciplewalk.com/Resources, pp. 16-28. Prairie DNA does not reflect true “Wesleyan DNA.”

the major problems facing the church can be solved if we can “fix worship.” The cultural DNA of the traditional church is definitely fixated on worship.

Seventh, Prairie churches are organized and controlled by a single cell of persons. Eighth, these lay leaders are resistant to new ideas and new people. The old timers will rarely allow the pastor to lead. A classic symptom of Prairie DNA is the conviction that laity in the church know more about Scripture, spirituality and what their church should do than their seminary educated pastor. The goal of prairie DNA is to keep the church as close as possible to the way it was in the days of the second Great Awakening; this is often seen in the choice of songs to sing. In the labeling of generations such as Modern, Postmodern and Millennial, prairie church folk are by preference still living in the nineteenth century or earlier.

Ninth, assimilation of newcomers whose primary contact with a church is through a worship service is a challenge requiring a high investment of energy. Tenth, prairie evangelism focuses on a salvation event mediated by a preacher and offered less and less frequently. Wesley’s followers heard evangelistic sermons twice daily and were individually coached every week in the class meeting. On the prairie, revival events are first quarterly, then annually, and finally disappear. Rather than challenging people to practice a disciplined faith in a small group on a weekly basis, prairie churches assimilate uncommitted people. When sin brings suffering, prairie churches try to soothe problems through pastoral care rather than solve problems through a call to repentance and holiness.

Finally, when prairie churches are under stress they remain faithful to their DNA and respond by pushing the trend to preserve their traditional homeostasis. They do something to the building itself in order to make it more attractive.⁸ They call upon the pastor to do more and lower the requirements for laity in the hope of attracting strangers uninterested in church; prairie DNA has low expectations of laity and high expectations of clergy. They offer more events to draw people in. They make a heartfelt gesture at ministering to community needs. They continue to do what worked over a century ago to attract people; it continues to fail.

Systemic Problem #4: STRANGER EVANGELISM

Human societies are actually living social networks of relationships where each person is linked by diverse forms of kinship. A gospel that spreads along human kinship networks will eventually unite people across all ethnic and socioeconomic barriers. Jesus, John Wesley and third world cell churches evangelize along these existing human networks and extend them. Systems prevent effective evangelism when they rely on preaching or any other mass media communication while ignoring the power of individual conversations to change lives.

Leadership is influence. Influence exists only within relationships. The work of the pastor is to equip the saints for the work of ministry; that ministry is the building up the body of Christ. The work of ministry to which the saints are called is specifically *oikodomeo* (οικοδομῶ), translated in the New Testament as either “building up” or “edifying” but can be understood in modern terminology as networking, linking, or connecting. The common element in every

⁸Church planting consultant Jim Griffith stated that the first action of a church with “bad DNA” to the growing stress of membership decline will be to first “do something to the church sign” and then fix up other parts of the church building and grounds to be more attractive. Jim Griffith, presentation, Office of Congregational Development, Conference Office, Springfield, IL, March, 2005.

diverse ministry of the saints should be the relational task of building community between individuals.⁹

Conversion is more directly related to relational influences on an individual than any other factor.¹⁰ Building up the body of Christ literally means building true community between the members and, by extension, with potential converts. The kingdom of God spreads from person to person within human networks of influence. Modern culture hungers for this sort of relational, nurturing intimacy in a world growing more disconnected. As the church is the primary builder of social networks, the decrease in social capital is both a cause and a result of the decline of church participation in America.¹¹ The church is failing in the work of building and maintaining the bridges of God between people.

There were no strangers in Wesley's Methodism. Wesley's followers performed acts of mercy toward their neighbors and included them in lifelong small relational groups for ongoing support and encouragement. Wesley resolved not to preach where he could not include everyone in class meetings for spiritual community: *I was more convinced then ever that the preaching like an apostle without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.*¹² To convert people without the relational support that will disciple them fully toward sanctification is like fathering children and then abandoning them.

Acts of evangelism and acts of mercy to strangers, if they do not result in ongoing relationships that heal, support and spiritually nurture, are fundamentally selfish acts that disregard the commandment to love our neighbor; this is why it is always easier to "witness" to strangers. The attraction paradigm combined with evangelism as a salvation event has resulted in the approach of inviting persons to worship where they arrive as strangers, worship with strangers, leave as strangers, and remain strangers. Consumer Christians "don't want to get involved." If the gospel spreads only through relational networks, one certain way to avoid stress and overcrowding in churches is to focus evangelistic efforts upon strangers and away from people that Christians personally know and with whom they interact on a weekly basis.

⁹Ephesians 4:12. I prefer the "triple definition of the one purpose" interpretation by Markus Barth in "VI. The Church Without Laymen and Priests" in *Ephesians: Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 34a:477-484. The saints are equipped for missional acts of service which result in the relational community of οἰκοδομῶ.

¹⁰Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 7-13. Cf. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 114-138.

¹¹Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 65-79, 391-392, 408-410. For more information, see the Workshop Materials section of this course.

¹²John Wesley, "Journal" (August 25, 1763), *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 3:144. This reflects a 90% loss of the faithful when there is worship available in the parish church without participation in a cell type network community as a means of sanctifying grace.