

We've Confused Leadership with Discipleship

Five years into [North Coast Church](#), Founding and Senior Pastor [Larry Osborne](#) realized the programmed discipleship classes his Vista, Calif., church was teaching weren't making disciples. In 1985, he implemented the church's small group system, now one of the largest small group ministries in the nation, with 91 percent of the 8,000-plus attendees involved in a weekly Growth Group. In this Q&A, Osborne shares about the church's shift from information to relationships and the "bur in his saddle" these days.

Last year you tweeted: "Discipleship is a rather simple concept: Obedience. Why do we make it so esoteric and complex?" How have we made discipleship complex?

The Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, simply means follower. That includes people at the front of the line, in the middle, and at the back of the line. And there are good followers and not so good followers. But we have tended to confuse leadership with discipleship. I hear people over and over say, "Well, I define a disciple as ...," and I have this sense that we probably ought to let Jesus define a disciple. He used the word *mathetes*. And in His definition of a disciple, He included some people who weren't exactly stellar in all the things we think a disciple should do and be.

Jesus talked about obedience: If you love me, you'll obey me. John talked about Here's how to know that you know me—we will obey Him. And obedience isn't perfection; it's obeying the light we have. According to Prov. 4:18, the light gets brighter the more we follow the light we have. But we tend to look at maturity. We love the lost, we love the baby Christian and the on-fire, charge-the-hill Christian. But anybody struggling, the smoldering wick or bruised reed, we want to snuff it out or break it off.

So that has been a bur in my saddle as I'm watching the pendulum swing from an easy "believism" to raising the bar and thinning the herd. Essentially, we're going back to the 1930s and '40s when my mom became a Christian. She grew up afraid of full commitment because she was always told, "If you do that, you'll end up in Africa. The Christians take the hard path."

What impact does/will this have on church leaders and their people?

It ends up in a lot of gift projection—trying to make people into us instead of what God's called them to be. It leads to absolute lack of patience and bearing with one another. Basically, we become what I call an accidental Pharisee. That's pretty much what the Pharisees did—you were either this or you weren't. It was a very clear black and white line. We tend to take Jesus' commands to an individual and make them into a command everybody must follow.

North Coast's mission statement is Making Disciples in a Healthy Environment. How have you simplified this concept?

We've always avoided classes and a set of hoops to jump through or even disciplines to practice. For 27 years, we've tried to get people into weekly community groups because we

believe that all the “one anothers” of Scripture and the things we’re supposed to obey are going to show up in community, whereas in a class all you’re doing is taking notes. There’s not a lab to live it out.

We’ve always had more than 80 percent of attendees involved. I think this year, we’re at 91 percent of weekend attendance. We believe everyone should be in a weekly community gathering of some sort. In our internal meetings, everything is about creating community. We’re very clear on what our core is—worship, teaching, community and mission. Everything else is just an ancillary offering.

Take us back 27 years. What was North Coast doing before small groups?

We did the typical classes. I led these things called Timothy Teams that I walked a bunch of men through, and they had notebooks full of information. But they weren’t necessarily treating their wives and children with any more biblical obedience and godliness. It was that way across the board. I looked around at our people, and they were becoming more rigid and prideful, and they weren’t really becoming more obedient. I just didn’t see a lessening of sin corresponding to an increase in information.

In 1985, I realized that people didn’t need more information and class time; they needed more lab work. The people who had a lot of information weren’t living it out. That’s when we decided to stop the classes and get people into small groups, which we consider the hub of our ministry.

What steps did you take to make the shift from information to relationships and secure buy-in from both church leadership and the congregation?

I got the approval of the elder board and informed the congregation we were going to cancel some of our “come and fill your notebook” classes and that we were going to get into small groups where we could live out our faith and talk about the application of what we heard on the weekend. I said we were no longer going to do classes; we were going to do life.

How did you know if this shift was effective at making disciples?

When the church was small, you could measure effectiveness anecdotally. Now we measure hard numbers. But in the early days, we started watching for community to take place. Were people expecting the organized church to minister to them in a crisis, or was the small group picking up the ball? Were people expecting the church as an organization to do things out in the community? Or were *they* getting out and serving with each other.

The other thing we tried to measure, again anecdotally, was sin because I can’t measure righteousness. You can fulfill all the spiritual disciplines and be in the middle of an affair. Three of my six mentors were Type a, jump-through-every-discipleship-hoop personalities, and three of them had affairs. That’s when I began to say all this little checklist stuff isn’t creating godly people. So I came to the conclusion that I can’t measure righteousness; I can measure sin. A doctor can’t tell me I’m healthy. He can say there’s no discernible illness. So what I look for is sin. That’s the sign there’s something wrong. But I don’t want artificial measurements of

righteousness—did you read your Bible every day, did you talk to a non-Christian about your faith, did you journal, did you go out and do community service? I've seen too many people in the middle of abusive relationships, affairs, addicted to porn, etc., that were doing all these things. They were jumping through the hoops. But the Gospel wasn't taking root.