

EXCERPT



Centering Discipleship *A Pathway for Multiplying Spectators into Mature Disciples*

July 11, 2023 | \$20, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0706-8

The church often lacks maturity and missional impact because discipleship is at its periphery. To get discipleship to the center, leaders need a locally rooted, culturally contextual discipleship pathway. This gutsy, practice-based guidebook is for leaders doing the hard work turning spectators into missional, mature followers of Jesus.

What is the “Main Thing?”

A custom in our household is that when you become a teenager, you trek the steep terrain to conquer the first of three peaks of Mount Olomana, the iconic giant overshadowing the windward side of Oahu. Every year after that, you traverse that mountain peak by peak until you're able to reach the ultimate summit. Our sixteen- and fifteen-year-old have summited this mountain with my husband using all the bouldering techniques and ropes required; our youngest will begin her trek next year. Steve and I initiated this tradition for our children not because it has anything to do with climbing but because it has everything to do with discipleship.

Climbing Mount Olomana is intended for our children to experience the journey firsthand, recognizing its importance, hardship, and beauty and being guided compassionately and patiently by someone who's just a little further ahead. By revisiting the same mountain year in and year out, they notice their own growth and progress, discovering that the ropes segment they once found terrifying is now less so, the grip that took forever to learn is now a breeze, and the climb that once produced uncertainty and hesitation now yields pleasure and expectation. Climbing Mount Olomana each year is akin to a discipleship pathway for our teenage children, and in our family we keep discipleship central. More than anything else, we strive to equip our children to leave our home for the adventure that awaits them as they mature and flourish in the way of Jesus for the sake of those around them.

Likewise, our local church community keeps discipleship central by orienting our life around it. Every owner (member) of our church community is disciplined along a discipleship pathway in the context of a community that's tethered to a place (neighborhood) or space (network) of mission for renewal. Every owner revisits the discipleship pathway year by year within a community. Every disciple experiences discipleship firsthand, recognizing its importance, hardship, and beauty, and is led by folks who are just a little further ahead of them in the journey. While the trek may differ from time to time (perhaps experiencing a change in weather, terrain, guide, or individual experience), we all follow the same discipleship pathway.

Following the same discipleship pathway allows community to notice our own growth and progress, and the familiarity of the journey produces joy and expectation. We not only see more and more ways we are individually and communally imitating Jesus, but we imitate his compassion and patience to journey alongside others in their discipleship. By moving discipleship from the periphery to the center, we are able to definitively say, “I am a disciple of Jesus, I know how I am a disciple of Jesus, and I know how to make disciples of Jesus.”

If we're honest with ourselves, many of the places of Christian worship we attend have an underlying assumption that if we just maintain a weekly Sunday gathering where we hope and pray for an increased number of attendees, a thirty-minute oration and thirty minutes of singing religious songs will make disciples who live as a community for the sake of the world and culture around them. At best, discipleship becomes additive: an attendee feels a spark of inspiration from a message or song and invites her coworker the following week, hoping and praying that a thirty-minute oration and thirty minutes of singing religious songs will make her coworker into an imitator of Jesus. Even the most ideal version of this adds to a growing mindset of spectatorship where we simply gather weekly to listen to a speaker and hear musicians.

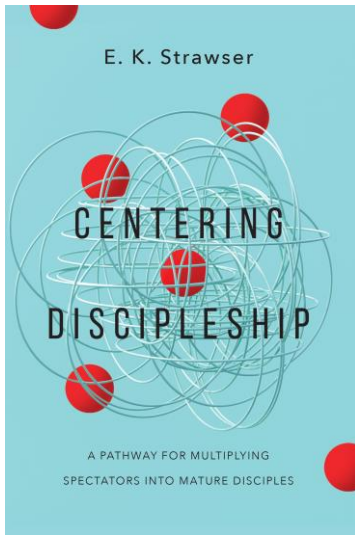


Tara Burns, print and online publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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"Centering Discipleship is a powerful handbook for any leader who wants to escape consumer models of Christianity and help their church pursue the Great Commission. Both erudite and practical, with years of experience, E. K. Strawser describes how to design adaptable, biblical, Jesus-shaped pathways of discipleship and evaluate their effectiveness. She reveals how to identify where church communities function in an unbiblical way and how to address these issues so discipleship can become central."

—Paul Maconochie, team leader for Uptick with the Baptist General Association of Virginia

The praxis of imitating Christ has nothing to do with just listening and hearing. Jesus closes his Sermon on the Mount, where he offers practical wisdom about how to live like him for the sake of the culture and world around us, with this:

Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:17-27)

Jesus is saying that Christlike praxis is about listening and doing. Christlike praxis is about seeing the fruit of transformation and renewal not only in his disciples but through his disciples. A sent community of people who listens to Jesus and does what he tells them to do together will not be limited to gathering weekly to listen to a sermon and sing songs. They'll be on the move together into the culture and world around them. Living into the praxis of self-giving love as a sent community is not an elective for disciples of Jesus. It's the main thing.

—adapted from chapter one, "Making Discipleship Central"

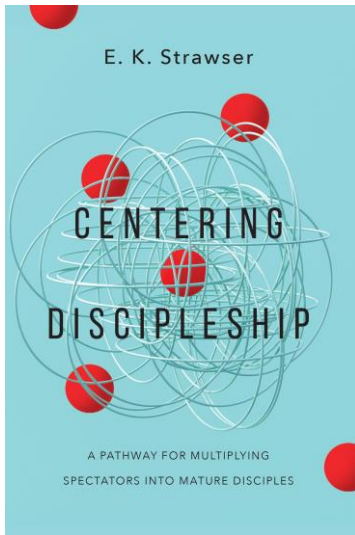


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Q & A



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E. K. Strawser is the co-vocational lead pastor of Ma Ke Alo o, nondenominational missional communities multiplying in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is a community physician at Ke Ola Pono, and an executive leader at the V3 Movement. Prior to transitioning to Hawaii, she served as adjunct professor of medicine at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and of African Studies at her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania after finishing her Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Dar es Salaam.

Equipping Leaders for Community Renewal

Is it time for the church to view discipleship through a fresh lens?

E. K. Strawser: While discipleship is not a new concept in the church, there are thousands of leaders in the church who would confess that they have never been disciplined nor have they ever disciplined someone else. Even among those who would claim to have experienced discipleship, most are not able to respond in concrete ways how they were disciplined and how they knew that they were disciplined. There is a stark need that has already shifted for Christian leaders to experience deep fruit of discipleship in their own lives and in the lives of those they care for and lead.

While many have read about and participated in discipleship training, most of these resources are either a.) too specific and restrictive to include a multitude of people types or b.) too theoretical in conversation to be of any practical use. There is a need in this population to view discipleship through a new lens and provide a discipleship pathway model that includes all kinds of people and allows them to immediately put it into practice.

Why is it important to get discipleship out of the periphery of the church and into the center?

E. K.: Disruptive re-imagination of today's church is necessary but so poorly understood in our culture because discipleship is at its periphery. In order to get discipleship to the center, leaders need to be equipped in utilizing a locally rooted, culturally contextual discipleship pathway to tether disciples who are disciple-makers to the neighborhood (or network) around them. When discipleship becomes central to your leadership and community, then discipleship becomes central to community and cultural renewal. Discipleship without mission is discipleship without Christ.

What contributions do you hope this book will make to the larger Christian community?

E. K.: This book is a straightforward, practical, gutsy guidebook for leaders, and it is designed for doers. I hope readers see it as a resource that:

- 1.) Clarifies the role and purpose of the pastor/leader around discipleship.
- 2.) Equips the church to restructure practically around discipleship.
- 3.) Uncovers underlying assumptions and hurdles to center discipleship.



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