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Part 1



**Discipleship's
Missing Link**

INTRODUCTION



A few years ago my wife, our family of four daughters, and I were invited to participate in a Christian family camp in Colorado for a one-week vacation. We expected it to be the trip of a lifetime.

We landed at Denver International Airport and began the three-hour drive into the mountains. While driving, I grew very tired, thinking perhaps the plane trip and a lack of caffeine may have contributed to my sleepiness. I asked my wife, Geri, to drive, but she was terrified by the narrowness of the mountainous roads.

At one point, however, I momentarily blacked out and swerved out of our lane. I pulled over. Now that we were out of the mountains, Geri took over the driving. We attributed my momentary lapse to fatigue.

When we arrived at the camp, about nine thousand feet above sea level, we checked in and prepared for a wonderful week in the Rocky Mountains. The view was breathtaking, the mountains an awesome reflection of God's glory. The schedule for the week included age-appropriate activities for each of our children, who ranged in ages at the time from six to fifteen, and also for us as adults.

I couldn't sleep the first night. Maybe it was the new pillow. I prayed that it was not the flu. I participated in the day's activities and fought off the aches and pains. The second night was a repeat of the first, only now I developed a cough that wouldn't quit. Yes, I had the flu—no question about it.

Geri, the girls, and I prayed for God to heal me so I could enjoy this opportunity of a lifetime. God didn't seem moved.

A doctor from the Midwest happened to be attending the camp week with his family. I approached him on the breakfast line and informed him that I had some flulike symptoms with a cough. Would

he mind prescribing something so I could get some sleep at night? “No problem,” he responded. “I’ll get you the strongest cough medicine available and an antibiotic.”

By the third and fourth days, however, I worsened. At this point Geri wasn’t speaking to me. She assumed I had overworked prior to vacation and had worn my body down. Her visions of us enjoying this dream vacation as a couple or family were gone. She was disappointed, to say the least. I coughed all night, so she moved into the other room with our two older girls. By day five, we exchanged looks, but few words.

She was sad and angry. I felt guilty. History seemed to be repeating itself with my getting sick on vacations and holidays.

What was so odd for me was that I appeared to be worsening every day. On day five I could barely walk to dinner and had begun spitting up some red phlegm. “It must be the red cough medicine,” I told myself. I was unable to eat and had just about finished the bottle of medicine. The cough only grew more relentless. It was clearly in my chest.

By our sixth and final night, I still had not slept. I began to grow afraid. It was becoming difficult to get out of bed. It took me thirty minutes to move from the bed to the bathroom.

It was obvious I was in trouble. I needed to get to a doctor.

The next morning I informed Geri I needed help. I was getting worse.

The kids were having the best vacation of their lives. It was a long way from the streets of New York. So I endured through lunch and tried to say good-bye as best I could to everyone and we got in the car to visit a doctor. He was from Texas and up in the Colorado mountains to serve a nearby youth camp.

He checked my symptoms, listened to my chest, and suggested that I had pneumonia. His nurse then hooked my finger up to a machine to check my oxygen level and could see I was having trouble breathing.

Maybe I was having a heart attack. Who knew?

At this point they grew alarmed and instructed me to get to a hospital to check out my pneumonia.

The nearest hospital was almost two hours away. Geri drove. I felt my life ebbing away, and I began drifting in and out of consciousness.

We drove through countless small towns. No hospitals. Where were the hospitals? I missed New York City!

Wrong Counsel Almost Ruined My Life

Finally we arrived at our destination, where a friend of a friend was lending us his townhouse. We dropped off the kids. One of his neighbors saw me lying in the back of our mini-van. Geri described my symptoms. The woman excitedly told her, “Get him to the medical clinic down the hill right away. He has HAPE.”

We didn’t know what she was talking about, but Geri came back to the car looking compassionate. That helped.

The nurse in the medical clinic took one look at me and rushed me past the people in the waiting room. They put me up to the same type of oxygen machine and found my breathing at less than 44 percent capacity.

Immediately another doctor rushed in and put me on an oxygen machine to give me oxygen. She then informed me that I would have been in a coma within a few hours and dead by the next morning. I was choking to death. X rays revealed my lungs had filled with water.

I had High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE), a severe form of altitude sickness, popularized by the movie *Vertical Limit*. It is relatively uncommon for people to get HAPE between 8,000 and 14,000 feet.

The medical personnel considered flying me down to a lower altitude immediately, but I responded well to the oxygen. Within twenty minutes I was asleep for the first time in almost a week.

I spent the next week connected to an oxygen tank. It took almost three weeks for my lungs to clear up and for me to be able to walk without becoming short of breath.

Many doctors, especially those in places other than Colorado, are unfamiliar with HAPE. How could they be? Colorado has the highest altitudes in the continental United States.

The first two doctors I saw misdiagnosed me. In all fairness, I had diagnosed myself the first time, and the doctor simply agreed. But I almost died.

These other doctors were not equipped to be counseling sick patients in the mountains of Colorado. Their wrong counsel almost ended my earthly life. In the same way, I realized, we pastors and leaders often give faulty counsel to spiritually sick people who fill our churches. Our training has been inadequate to address the deep needs underneath the surface of people’s lives.

Along the way in my journey of growing as a Christian, I received teaching and training that did a lot of good. Unfortunately, the solutions were mostly temporary. The prescriptions failed to root out the sinful patterns and habits in my life.

Unfortunately,
many people
remained sick and
some even “died”
under my
leadership.

Our Wrong Counsel Keeps People Spiritually Immature

I have to admit that, like those doctors, I have misdiagnosed people who have come to me for help. When some-

one had relational problems or emotional issues, I applied every spiritual remedy I knew. Unfortunately, many people remained sick and some even “died” under my leadership.

For example:

- A couple comes to me after the husband has admitted to a one-year affair with a family friend that occurred five years earlier in their marriage. I am grateful for the conviction of the Holy Spirit in his life. I pray for them and recommend a marriage book I know with a good chapter on forgiveness for the wife. I exhort them both to pursue God wholeheartedly. I pray and hope for the best.
- A gifted musician joins our church to use his gifts for God. He is charismatic and experienced. The congregation loves him. He asks many of us to pray for his wife, that God will put her heart in the right place. We do so. I pray and hope for the best. We later learn that this is not a minor friction. The conflict was building up for years, she had moved out and resettled five hundred miles away, and he is undeniably part of the problem.
- Armstrong is a friend and leader in the church. He serves whenever there is a need. The only problem is that he is temperamental, unpredictable, and moody. We tiptoe around him. I pray and hope for the best.
- Larry is forty years old, single, and unemployed again. He has a résumé four pages long. He rarely stays at a job or in a relationship with the opposite sex for more than a few months. We pray for him, encourage him to affirm his identity in Christ, and ask God to open new doors for him. I pray and hope for the best.

Today, I no longer simply pray and hope for the best. Each of the above scenarios required a level of discipleship that went beyond a skin-deep, superficial, quick fix. They each later submitted to a scalpel by taking a serious, prayerful look at the deeper issues I will outline in this book. First, however, I as a leader had to undergo a revolution in the way I understood and approached discipleship.

Imbalanced Spirituality

The sad truth is that too little difference exists, in terms of emotional and relational maturity, between God's people inside the church and those outside who claim no relationship to Jesus Christ. Even more alarming, when you go beyond the praise and worship of our large meetings and conventions and into the homes and small-group meetings of God's people, you often find a valley littered by broken and failed relationships.

Do any of the following people remind you of someone in your church?

1. The board member who never says "I was wrong" or "Sorry."
2. The children's church leader who constantly criticizes others.
3. The high-control small-group leader who cannot tolerate different points of view.
4. The middle-aged father of two toddlers who is secretly addicted to pornography.
5. The thirty-five-year-old husband busily serving in the church, unaware of his wife's loneliness at home.
6. The worship leader who interprets any suggestion as a personal attack and personal rejection.
7. The Sunday school teacher struggling with feeling of bitterness and resentment toward the pastor but afraid to say anything.
8. The exemplary "servant" who tirelessly volunteers in four different ministries but rarely takes any personal time to take care of himself or herself.
9. Two intercessors who use prayer meetings to escape from the painful reality of their marriage.
10. The people in your small group who are never transparent about their struggles or difficulties.

They may present themselves as spiritually mature, but something is terribly imbalanced about their spirituality. The sad reality is that too

Too many people in our churches are fixated at a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed.

many people in our churches are fixated at a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed.

Many are supposedly “spiritually mature” but remain infants, children, or teenagers emotionally. They demonstrate little ability to process anger, sadness, or hurt. They whine, complain, distance themselves, blame, and use sarcasm—like little children when they don’t get their way. Highly

defensive to criticism or differences of opinion, they expect to be taken care of and often treat people as objects to meet their needs.

Why?

The answer is what this book is about. The roots of the problem lie in a faulty spirituality, stemming from a faulty biblical theology (chs. 3 and 4). Many Christians have received helpful training in certain essential areas of discipleship, such as prayer, Bible study, worship, discovery of their spiritual gifts, or learning how to explain the Gospel to someone else. Yet Jesus’ followers also need training and skills in how to look beneath the surface of the iceberg in their lives (ch. 5), to break the power of how their past influences the present (ch. 6), to live in brokenness and vulnerability (ch. 7), to know their limits (ch. 8), to embrace their loss and grief (ch. 9), and to make incarnation their model for loving well (ch. 10). *Making incarnation the top priority in order to love others well is both the climax and point of the entire book.* The church is to be known, above all else, as a community that radically and powerfully loves others. Sadly, this is not generally our reputation.

Despite all the emphasis today on spiritual formation, church leaders rarely address what spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health, especially as it relates to how we love other people.

The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship. We desperately need, I believe, to reexamine the whole of Scripture—and the life of Jesus in particular—in order to grasp the dynamics of this link.

While I do believe in the important place of professionally trained Christian counselors to bring expertise to the church, I believe the church

of Jesus Christ is to be the primary vehicle of our spiritual and emotional maturity. Sadly, for too long we have delegated “emotional” issues to the therapist’s office and taken responsibility only for “spiritual” problems in the church. The two are inseparably linked and critical to a fully biblical discipleship.

I believe wholeheartedly that the Lord Jesus and his church are the hope of the world. My commitment is to Scripture as the Word of God, the authority under which we as God’s church are to live. I have been teaching it for all my adult life. I remain committed to the indispensability of Scripture, prayer, fellowship, worship, Sabbath-keeping, faithfulness in using our spiritual gifts, small groups and community life, stewardship of our resources, and the centrality of the Gospel to all of life. But unless we integrate emotional maturity with a focus on loving well into our discipleship, we are in danger of missing God’s point completely—love.

I write as a pastor, not a therapist or professional counselor. I am the senior pastor of a multiethnic, international church with people from over fifty-five different countries in the congregation. We have planted six other churches and have others in for-

mation. Thus, I am writing out of a profound love for the church of Jesus Christ. I am also keenly aware that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America.”¹ My prayer is that this book will contribute to the development of spiritual fathers and mothers of the faith for these churches and others around the world.

Embracing the truth about the emotional parts of myself unleashed nothing short of a revolution in my understanding of God, Scripture, the nature of Christian maturity, and the role of the church. I can no longer deny the truth that emotional and spiritual maturity are inseparable.

God’s mercy has enabled me to survive and tell this story. If you would like God to transform both you and your church, I invite you to read on.

The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship.

CHAPTER 1

AS GO THE LEADERS, SO GOES THE CHURCH



The overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership. In fact, the key to successful spiritual leadership has much more to do with the leader's internal life than with the leader's expertise, gifts, or experience.

It took me a long time to realize that yet another leadership seminar or more information was not the key to "successful" church leadership. In fact, my journey toward leading an emotionally and spiritually healthy church was not triggered in a seminar or book. Instead, it was brought to a head with a very painful conversation at home.

My Wife Couldn't Take It Anymore

"Pete, I'm leaving the church," my wife Geri had muttered quietly. I sat still, too stunned to respond.

"I can't take any more of this stress—the constant crisis," she continued.

Geri had been more than patient. I had brought home constant pressure and tension from church, year after year. Now the woman I had promised to love just as Christ loved the church was exhausted.

We had experienced eight unrelenting years of stress.

"I'm not doing it anymore," she concluded. "This church is no longer life for me. It is death."

When a church member says, “I’m leaving the church,” most pastors don’t feel very good. But when your wife of nine years says it, your world is turned upside down.

We were in the bedroom. I remember the day well.

“Pete, I love you, but I’m leaving the church,” she summarized very calmly. “I no longer respect your leadership.”

I was visibly shaken and didn’t know what to say or do. I felt shamed, alone, and angry.

I tried raising my voice to intimidate her: “That is out of the question,” I bellowed. “All right, so I’ve made a few mistakes.”

But she calmly continued, “It’s not that simple. You don’t have the guts to lead—to confront the people who need to be confronted. You don’t lead. You’re too afraid that people will leave the church. You’re too afraid of what they’ll think about you.”

I was outraged.

“I’m getting to it!” I yelled defensively. “I’m working on it.” (For the last two years, I really had been trying, but somehow still wasn’t up to it.)

“Good for you, but I can’t wait any more,” she replied.

There was a long pause of silence. Then she uttered the words that changed the power balance in our marriage permanently: “Pete, I quit.”

It is said that the most powerful person in the world is one who has nothing to lose. Geri no longer had anything to lose. She was dying on the inside, and I hadn’t listened to or responded to her calls for help.

She softly continued, “I love you, Pete. But the truth is, I would be happier separated than married. At least then you would have to take the kids on weekends. Then maybe you’d even listen!”

“How could you say such a thing?” I complained. “Don’t even think about it.”

She was calm and resolute in her decision. I was enraged. A good Christian wife, married to a Christian (and a pastor I may add), does not do this. I understood at that moment why a husband could fly into a rage and kill the wife he loves.

She had asserted herself. She was forcing me to listen.

I wanted to die. This was going to require me to change!

“This church is no longer life for me.
It is death.”

The Beginnings of This Mess

How did we get to this point?

Eight years previously, my wife and I had begun a church with the vision to plant a church among the working classes in Queens, New York City, that would develop leaders to plant other churches both in New York City and around the world.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that I had a vision and Geri followed. Wasn't that the biblical way large decisions were supposed to be made in a marriage?

Now, four children later, she was battle weary and wanted a life and a marriage. By this time I agreed. The problem was my sense of responsibility to build the church, and to do so for other people. I had little energy left over to parent our children or to enjoy Geri. I had even less energy to enjoy a "life," whatever that was! Even when I was physically present, such as at a soccer game for one of our daughters, my mind was usually focused on something related to the church.

I remember wondering, *Am I supposed to be living so miserably and so pressured in order that other people can experience joy in God?* It sure felt that way.

Weeks had turned into months. Months into years. The years had become almost a decade, and the crisis was now in full bloom. The sober reality was that I had made little time during those nine years for the joys of parenting and marriage. I was too preoccupied with the incessant demands of pastoring a church. (How well I now know that I will never get those years back.)

Jesus does call us to die to ourselves. The problem was that we had died to the wrong things.

Jesus does call us to die to ourselves. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The problem was that we had died to the wrong things. We mistakenly thought that

dying to ourselves for the sake of the Gospel meant dying to self-care, to feelings of sadness, to anger, to grief, to doubt, to struggles, to our healthy dreams and desires, and to passions we had enjoyed before our marriage.

Geri has always loved the outdoors and nature. She values her large, extended family. She loves the field of recreation, creating opportunities for people to have fun. There was rarely time for those pleasures.

Workaholics for God

We were very busy for God. Our lives were filled with serving, doing, and trying to love other people. It felt at times that we weren't supposed to do some of the things that would give me energy and joy, so that others could. In actuality, we had died to something God never intended to be killed (as I will explain later).

I remember sitting at the dinner table with my brother-in-law as he talked about his joy in being a referee and coach for girls' basketball teams.

"Must be nice," I mumbled to myself. "Too bad I can't have that kind of freedom."

I had a profound experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ when I became a Christian at age nineteen. His love filled me with passion to serve him. Over time, however, this passion became a burden.

The incessant demands of the church planting in New York City, in addition to my neglect of the emotional dimensions of spirituality, slowly turned my joy into "duty." My life became out of balance, and I slowly bought into the lie that the more I suffered for Christ, the more he would love me. I began to feel guilty about taking too much time off and enjoying places like the beach.

My spiritual foundation was finally being revealed for what it was: wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:10–15). I had limped along for so many years that the limp now seemed normal.

Geri's courageous step on that cold January evening saved me. God intervened dramatically through Geri's words, "I quit."

It was probably the most loving, courageous act of service she has ever done for me. It forced me to seek professional help to resolve my "vocational" crisis. Unconsciously, I hoped the counselor would straighten *Geri* out so I could get on with my life and the church.

Little did I know what was ahead!

God forced me to take a long, painful look at the truth—the truth about myself, our marriage, our lives, the church. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). It was demoralizing to admit, finally, that the intensity of my engagement in spiritual disciplines had not worked spiritual maturity into my life.

Why? I ignored the emotional components of discipleship in my life.

I had limped along for so many years that the limp now seemed normal.

Life before This Crisis of Intimacy

I grew up in a New Jersey suburb, in an Italian American family, only one mile from the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

I went away to college in 1974, got involved in a Bible study on campus and became a follower of Jesus Christ during my sophomore year. That experience launched me into a spiritual journey that would include, over the next six years, the Catholic charismatic movement; a bilingual Spanish-English, an inner-city, mainline Protestant church; an African American church; Pentecostalism; and evangelicalism.

After teaching high-school English for one year, I joined the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational ministry that facilitates Christian groups on university and college campuses. I worked for three years at Rutgers University and other New Jersey colleges. Then I went off to graduate studies at Princeton Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

During those college years I met and became good friends with the young woman who would later become my wife. In 1984 Geri and I were married, and we entered a whirlwind—not even realizing at first that the winds were anything but normal. At the five-month mark of married life, I graduated from seminary, and the next day we moved to Costa Rica. For one year we studied Spanish in preparation to return to New York City. Geri returned to her parents eight months pregnant. I returned from Costa Rica two nights before our first baby was born.

One month later the three of us moved to Queens, New York City. I spent a year serving as an assistant pastor in an all-Spanish immigrant church and teaching in a Spanish seminary. The experiences gave us opportunities to perfect our Spanish and discern God's will for our future. That year also initiated us into the world of two million illegal immigrants from around the globe, who fill large cities like New York. We became friends with people who had fled death squads in El Salvador, drug cartels in Columbia, civil war in Nicaragua, and implacable poverty in Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

In April 1987, we made an ill-fated effort to launch a new English-speaking church among second-generation Hispanics. Undaunted, we looked for other ways to follow God's dream for us.

The Start of the Dream?

Finally, in September 1987, we started New Life Fellowship, a contemporary church in a working-class, multiethnic, primarily immi-

grant section of Queens. (Of the two and a half million residents of Queens, more than half are foreign-born. The immediate Corona-Elmhurst neighborhood of our current church meeting site includes people from 123 nations. *National Geographic* calls “Elmhurst 11373 the most ethnically diverse zip code in the United States.”¹ Roger Sanjek picked the Corona-Elmhurst section of Queens, New York, for his study called *The Future of Us All*, calling it “perhaps the most ethnically mixed community in the world”² and noting its rapid change from 1960 at 98 percent white, 1970 at 67 percent, 1980 at 34 percent, and 1990 to 18 percent white.³

Our first worship service began with 45 people. God moved powerfully in those early years. After little more than a year we had grown to 160 people. By the end of the third year, I began a Spanish congregation. By the

end of the sixth year, there were 400 in the English congregation plus another 250 in our first Spanish congregation. Large numbers of these people had become Christians through New Life.

My parachurch days with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship taught me practical ministry skills, such as how to lead a Bible study, how to share the Gospel, and how to answer questions non-Christians commonly ask. My seminary education gave me the intellectual tools I needed—Greek, Hebrew, church history, systematic theology, hermeneutics, and more.

Unfortunately, neither background prepared me for planting a church in Queens. I was immediately thrust into a crash course to understand what Paul meant when he said that the Gospel comes “not with wise and persuasive words” but with “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4).

During those early years of New Life, God taught us a great deal about prayer and fasting, healing the sick, the reality of demons, spiritual warfare, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and hearing God’s voice. Whatever I learned, I taught the congregation.

People were becoming Christians, with literally hundreds beginning a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The poor were being served in new, creative ways. We were developing leaders, multiplying small groups, feeding the homeless, and planting new churches. But all was not well beneath the surface, especially on a leadership level.

We were gaining
the whole world
by doing a great
work for God while
at the same time
losing our souls.