

Book Review

How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend.

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According to many observers the American Church faces a crisis in disciple-making. George Barna laments the fact that, "...stunningly few churches have a church of disciples" [*Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001)]. Richard Foster agrees, "Perhaps the greatest malady in the Church today is converts to Christ who are not disciples of Christ—a clear contradiction in term. This malady affects everything in church life..." [*Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993)]. To counter this weakness I welcome good books on discipleship and spiritual growth. Best-selling authors of the *Boundaries* franchise, psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend, have written one of the best.

Unclear thinking and ineffective strategies abound in the area of making disciples. Cloud and Townsend do much to dispel the fog. Among the myriad of insights they offer, I selected several that churches would do well to adopt. First, among an assortment of means for growth, they focus heavily on the need for meaningful relationships, devoting four chapters to this area. This contrasts with the contemporary tendency to move people through meetings and programs. Three or four months in a discipleship program and a new set of

disciples supposedly emerges, each with a certificate of completion. Information transfer may occur, but rarely life transformation. Instead of this, the authors show that we were created for connectedness with others. Meaningful relationships and accountability within a small group are keys to growth.

Following Jesus demands time, energy, courage, priority, and passion. Two-thirds of believers, however, said they were too busy to commit to a discipling process, and one-quarter lacked the interest and motivation (Barna, *Growing True Disciples*). In light of this fact, churches that would make disciples need to make strong motivation a high priority. In the literature on disciple making, however, I have seen little on this subject. To their credit, Cloud and Townsend devote an entire chapter, along with part of another, to this area. They point out that trying to motivate people through the "religious way" in which they "should do this or that" is not generally effective. "For any of us to be motivated to grow," they state, "we must see doing things the 'right' way as the only way life is going to work."

The authors make other contributions worthy of note, three of which I will cite here. First, they emphasize the fact that all growth is related. Spirituality is not something that we can compartmentalize. We do not grow spiritually without it affecting emotional and relational growth,

and vice versa. Second, they ably and thoroughly connect major biblical truths to the growth process, instead of simply relying on secular insights. Finally, they distinguish between good and bad suffering, between that which is therapeutic and beneficial for growth and that which is destructive.

I found only one small weakness in this excellent volume. The authors define growth as the overcoming of spiritual-emotional-relational problems such as addictions, compulsions, guilt, troubled relationships, and inadequate parenting. Thus growth is seen as “healing,” “restoring,” and dealing with “repair issues.” All the illustrations belong to this category. Perhaps we should expect this from two psychologists, but, what about those who do not have serious hang-ups? Certainly many of the principles also apply, but this factor causes the book to fall short of the authors’ goal of providing a “comprehensive approach to the growth process.” This is only a quibble. Anyone interested in disciple-making should get this book.