

A Church Leader's Guide to

Developing Discipleship That Sticks

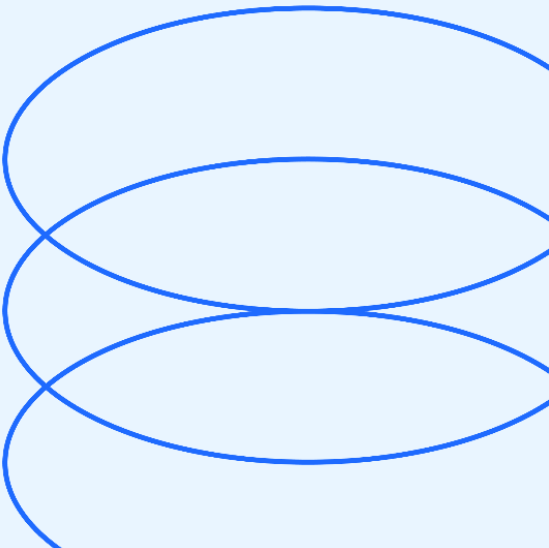
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Introduction



A Crisis in the Pew

Something's not working in the twenty-first-century church.

God is doing incredible things around the world. In regions like the Middle East, East Africa, and parts of South Asia, people are coming to faith in Jesus in unprecedented numbers. House church movements are multiplying. The gospel is reaching unreached people groups. And in the US, churches are serving communities, planting new congregations, and adapting creatively to cultural changes.

But Jesus was clear about job #1 for the church:

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
— Matthew 28:19–20 (CSB)

We can get everything else right—creative outreach, strong worship, vibrant community—but if we get discipleship wrong, we've missed the purpose of the church. And across theological lines, denominational boundaries, and ministry styles, the verdict is in:

We have a discipleship crisis in the American church:

“The larger scandal is biblical ignorance among Christians. Choose whichever statistic or survey you like, the general pattern is the same. America's Christians know less and less about the Bible. It shows.”¹
— Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The heart cannot love what the mind does not know.”²
— Jen Wilkin, Author & Bible Teacher

“We live in an unprecedented era of Bible access, and yet, biblical literacy is falling.”³
—Brandon Hilgemann, Pastor

¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “[The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It's Our Problem](#),” *Albert Mohler* (blog), January 20, 2016.

² Jen Wilkin, [Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds](#) (Crossway, 2019), 30.

³ Brandon Hilgemann, “[How the Bible Became More Available but Less Read Than Ever](#),” *Pro Preacher*, September 5, 2024.

Despite our access to Scripture and resources, many believers are spiritually malnourished. Fewer people are reading the Bible. Even fewer are being equipped to obey it. The result? Shallow faith, doctrinal confusion, and churches full of people who aren't being formed into the image of Christ. Consider the following datapoints:

- [Only 10 percent of Americans read the Bible daily.](#)⁴
- [40 percent of Protestant churchgoers read the Bible on their own either weekly or less often.](#)⁵
- [Close to three-quarters of American evangelicals affirm the Arian belief that Jesus is the “first and greatest being created by God.”](#)⁶
- [44 percent of evangelicals believe Jesus was a great teacher but not God.](#)⁷

In his 2020 book, *Deep Discipleship*, Pastor J. T. English argues that the problem of the twenty-first-century American church isn't that people are leaving the church because we've asked them to do too much. The problem is actually the opposite. *We haven't asked enough of them.*

“Put simply, we have settled for a shallow approach to discipleship, believing that breadth will lead to depth,” English writes. “We have adopted philosophies of ministry that focus on growing crowds instead of growing Christians.”

Yet as dark as the discipleship crisis in the church looks right now, it's hardly a death sentence. Jesus promises in Matthew 16:18 that the gates of hell itself couldn't stop the church.

That's what this guide is about. In the pages ahead, we'll explore how we got here, what's keeping people from engaging Scripture, and how churches can lead the way forward. We'll highlight practical strategies, fresh vision, and even a few tools that can help—because there is a path out of this crisis, and it starts with returning to the Word of God.

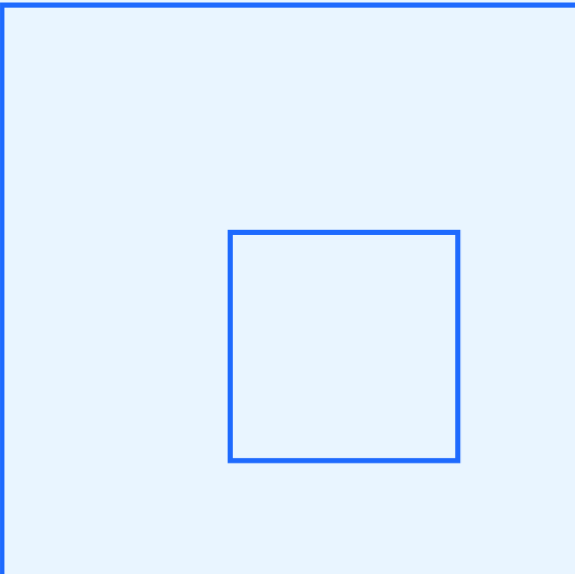
⁴ Jeffery Fulks, Randy Petersen, and John Farquhar Plake, [State of the Bible: USA 2022](#) (American Bible Society, 2022).

⁵ “[Fast Facts](#),” *Lifeway Research*, 2025. Accessed April 8, 2025.

⁶ Joe Carter, “[The State of Theology: What Do People Really Believe in 2022?](#),” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 19, 2022.

⁷ Carter, “[State of Theology](#).”

How We Got Here



The discipleship crisis in today's church didn't happen overnight. It's the result of a slow drift that's taken place over decades—shaped by shifts in both American culture and the church itself. Multiple factors have contributed to where we are now, and understanding those influences is key to moving forward.

Let's start with the cultural changes that have reshaped American religious life over the past few decades. America has become increasingly secular. Though the United States remains more religious than other industrialized nations, most notably European nations, the number of Americans with a biblical worldview has declined sharply in recent years.

Much of that struggle with biblical worldview has come through a creeping syncretism. Many believers unintentionally mix biblical teaching with the values of secular culture.

For example, many Christians believe that "God just wants me to be happy." That may sound good, but it subtly swaps the focus of our faith from glorifying God to our personal comfort. This blending dilutes discipleship, creating a faith that feels familiar but lacks the depth and authority of Scripture. If churches hope to make resilient disciples, they must help people recognize and correct these mixed beliefs.

But more than cultural changes outside the church have contributed to today's discipleship crisis. Changes in churches themselves have made an impact, as well. Most of the dominant ministry models in recent decades have emphasized attendance and spiritual activity, not so much spiritual depth. During the late twentieth century, seeker-sensitive approaches grew churches rapidly (something we can all celebrate) but often downplayed deep, systematic Bible teaching and personal discipleship.

Nearly twenty years ago, Willow Creek Community Church famously recognized its longstanding reliance on programs had not led to the formation of mature Jesus-followers. Even the most faithful participants in church life [had not grown more in their love of God and people](#).⁸

Willow Creek wasn't alone. It represented a broader historical shift in how churches across America approached ministry—changes that would dramatically shape discipleship practices in the decades that followed.

For example, historically, Sunday school classes provided churches with a consistent way to systematically teach the Bible to all ages. While the answer to today's discipleship crisis isn't

⁸ "[Willow Creek Repents?](#)," *Christianity Today*, October 18, 2007.

simply reviving old programs, the loss of intentional biblical education like Sunday school left many churches without clear ways to anchor believers deeply in Scripture.

In his book, *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard pointed to the church's theology itself as the culprit, suggesting we're calling people to believe without calling them to follow Jesus in a way that's formed by the clear teaching and authority of Scripture.

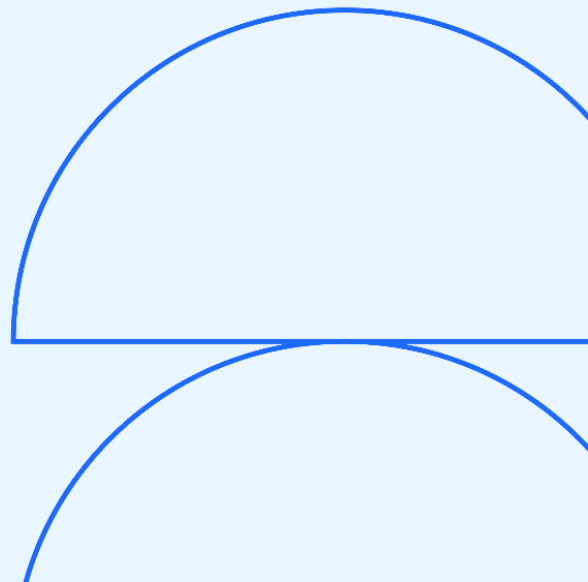
Willard writes:

So the greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as “Christians” will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.⁹

These factors—cultural, ecclesiastical, theological, etc.—come down to one gaping hole. We've distanced ourselves from the one crucial element for real discipleship—the Holy Scriptures themselves.

⁹ Dallas Willard, [*The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship*](#) (HarperOne, 2006), xv.

Why Bible Engagement Is the Game- Changer



So how do we move forward?

If distancing ourselves from Scripture has created the discipleship crisis, then reconnecting deeply and intentionally with God's Word is the pathway back to effective disciple-making.

"The Bible is at the center of the Christian life," writes J. T. English in [*Deep Discipleship*](#). "It is impossible to be a follower of Christ without being a student of his Word."¹⁰

For Christians, the Bible isn't only one more spiritual tool to reach for in tough times. It's the living, active Word of God: powerful and precise, and as Hebrews 4:12 describes it, "sharper than any double-edged sword."

When followers of Jesus engage with Scripture consistently and thoughtfully, it shapes them to become more like him. We make better decisions and develop the kind of resilient faith that can handle the ups and downs of life. [Studies show that Christians who read God's Word at least four days per week](#) are:

- More likely to share their faith, give to charity, attend church, pray regularly, etc.
- Less likely to struggle with bitterness, destructive thoughts, unforgiveness, and discouragement
- Less likely to give in to temptations to drink excessively, view pornography, lash out in anger, gossip, and lie

That's why the Bible is essential. It's the foundational resource for disciple-making.

But reading the Bible alone, frankly, isn't enough. Scripture isn't an incantation you need only read a few times to magically improve your life. Its power comes when we trust in its reliability and place our lives under its authority.

Believers don't grow into faithful disciples of Jesus by simply picking up bits and pieces of Bible knowledge on Sunday mornings. Real growth happens when we move beyond knowing Scripture to trusting it, submitting to it, and allowing it to reshape our thinking, desires, and daily lives. That kind of transformation doesn't happen by accident. It happens because something—or someone—guides us to anchor our lives in God's Word.

That's what has the potential to change everything about the church in the twenty-first century. That's what has the potential to transform your church into the kind of Jesus-following community God has called it to be.

¹⁰ J. T. English, [*Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus*](#) (B&H, 2020), 108.

Only consistent Bible reading and studying can move the needle forward. It's not just one element of discipleship—it's the foundation.

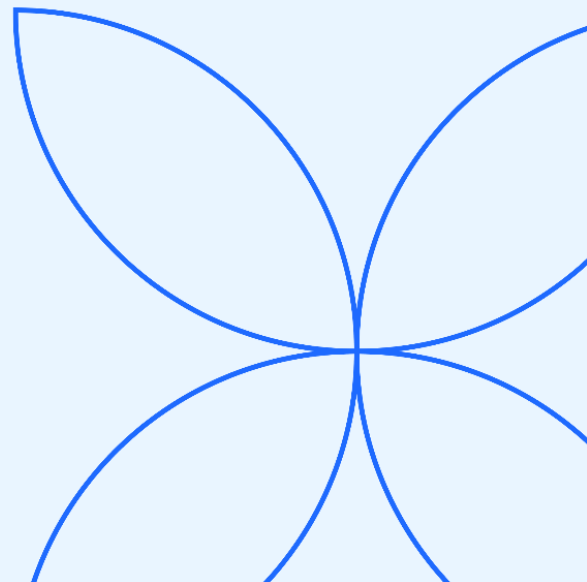
Only with a deep foundation in God's Word do our prayers align with God's heart and reflect the desires of the Spirit rather than just our own.

Only if we're centered on the Holy Scriptures will our worship be grounded in truth, rather than driven by emotion or individual experience.

Only the Bible can transform our charity and service into acts of Spirit-led obedience instead of feel-good projects or self-driven efforts.

If the church hopes to reverse the current crisis, it must start by helping people build their lives on the only truth strong enough to hold them up.

What's Holding Us Back?



Barriers to Bible Engagement

If Bible engagement is so clearly transformative, why do so few believers actually do it? It's not because they're lazy or uninterested. In fact, most Christians genuinely want to grow. But they're swimming upstream—against a powerful current that makes consistent Bible engagement hard to sustain.

In a few words: The headwinds are mighty.

Above, I described a few of the cultural reasons discipleship has waned in recent decades. But they are only the tip of the iceberg.

These personal and church barriers to greater Bible engagement won't budge easily.

The Personal-Level Barriers

- **Time and busyness:** We still live within the same twenty-four-hour days and seven-day weeks that our ancestors did. But these days, we try to pack so much more into them. The pace of life hasn't just increased, it has become more fragmented, making it harder to prioritize what matters most.
- **Lack of confidence:** The world of the Bible can feel pretty unfamiliar—even overwhelming—to modern readers. Because of that, many believers don't feel confident about connecting what they read to their everyday lives. So, without even realizing it, they tend to pull back and disengage from Scripture altogether.
- **Perceived irrelevance:** Stories of plagues, divine judgment, and polygamous kings seem far removed from the experiences of many of today's churchgoers. Many now wonder what the text of the Bible could actually mean in their lives.
- **Past disappointment or guilt:** Those who have been Christians for years remember many past failed attempts at reading the Bible. Guilt slowly turns into avoidance. If they never try to build a regular Bible-reading habit, they can't fail again.

Church-Level Barriers

- **Program overload without depth:** Trying to adjust to the speed and flash of modern life, churches have tended to emphasize events over spiritual

formation. With their schedules so full of programs, deep Bible study falls by the wayside. Church leaders tend to assume their congregants are studying the Bible rather than actually cultivating it.

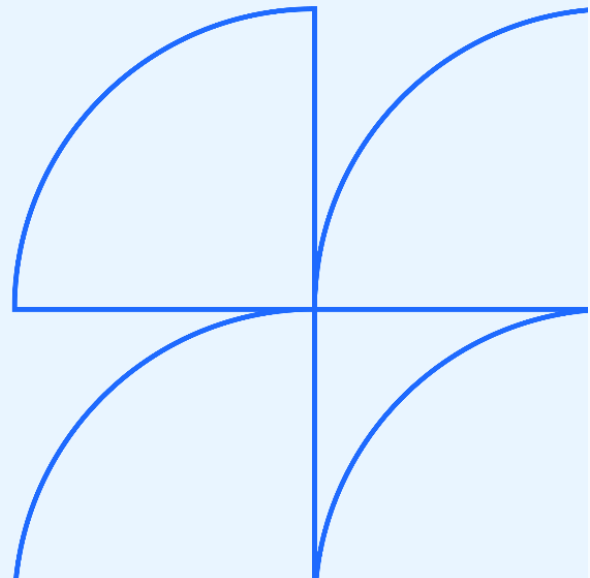
- **Lack of an intentional plan:** Many churches don't have a clear pathway for helping people grow more effective in applying the Bible. Guests come to faith in Christ, get baptized, join the church, but they aren't sure what's next. They are never taught how to study the Bible and grow outside of corporate worship times.
- **Low expectations or modeling:** Church leaders often struggle to model faithful Bible engagement. As churches grow larger, many churchgoers don't have a personal relationship with their leaders, so they don't see them engage with Scripture outside of the pulpit. When the Bible is primarily associated with a Sunday sermon or a prepared talk, it subtly communicates that deep Bible study is something reserved for professionals.

These barriers are real—but they're not insurmountable.

Most believers want to grow spiritually. They want to understand the Bible. But without a clear path, supportive community, and consistent encouragement, even their best intentions fall flat.

That's where the church comes in. Churches can either reinforce the barriers—or remove them. They can either let people drift or guide them into a deeper life with God through his Word. In the next chapter, we'll explore five strategic practices churches can implement to clear the path for Bible engagement—and reignite true disciple-making in the process.

5 Practices to Reignite Discipleship



To at least some degree, every church will face the barriers to Bible engagement identified in the last chapter. No church is immune. The question when you face them becomes: What will you do about them?

The five practices below shouldn't surprise you. You likely already do them. But the difference lies in how they're executed. They're simple, but they're also powerful when they're put together.

1. Teach the Bible from the pulpit

The pulpit is one of the church's most strategic tools for discipleship. Each week, the sermon offers a chance to show that the Bible is central and relevant.

When preachers teach with care and clarity, they model how to study Scripture—not just what to believe. This helps listeners connect biblical truths to their daily lives, addressing the barrier of perceived irrelevance and deepening trust in the Bible's authority.

For instance, in a sermon on Psalm 23, a pastor might highlight repeated phrases, explain the context of shepherding in ancient Israel, and apply the message to everyday trust in God. By showing the process—rather than only the outcome—preachers equip their people to study Scripture on their own.

This kind of preaching can inspire curiosity and shape how congregants read the Bible beyond Sunday. It becomes both a message and a model for discipleship.

2. Encourage daily reading habits

Many Christians want to read the Bible but feel stuck or unsure of where to begin. Churches can help by offering simple reading plans, tools, and encouragement that make Bible reading more accessible. Consider:

- A shared churchwide reading plan
- Weekly check-ins or testimonies about what people are learning
- Mobile reminders or digital devotionals

When people begin reading and responding to the Word even four days a week, research shows dramatic life changes begin to happen—from increased generosity and evangelism to greater joy and resilience. Forming a habit of Bible reading tackles the barriers of busyness, lack of confidence, and guilt from past inconsistency.

3. Launch Scripture-focused small groups

Many small groups default to fellowship-centric gatherings or topical studies that never crack open the Bible. But groups can be powerful engines of Bible engagement if they're centered on Scripture.

Support group leaders with tools, training, and curriculum that prioritize the Word. Encourage group members to read and reflect on the passage before they meet. Let the Bible set the agenda. You can also tie the Bible engagement in these groups to your regular sermons schedule and/or daily Bible reading plans, helping reinforce consistent engagement across church life. In groups, people have space to ask questions, share struggles, and apply Scripture in community.

4. Foster 1-on-1 discipleship relationships

Jesus taught not only the crowds—he invested deeply in a few. Churches can reclaim this model by encouraging more seasoned believers to walk with younger Christians in Scripture-based discipleship.

These relationships offer:

- Accountability for Bible reading
- Personalized discussion of how Scripture applies
- Prayer and encouragement grounded in the Word

One-on-one discipling is one of the most effective ways to break down the confidence gap and model Bible engagement up close. It reinforces that Scripture isn't for Sunday only—it's for life.

5. Equip parents to disciple their kids

In Deuteronomy 6, God instructed his people to impress his words on their children throughout their everyday life. Churches that want to build a Scripture-saturated culture must equip parents to make the Bible a natural part of their family rhythms.

Help parents:

- Read Scripture with their kids regularly
- Talk about God's Word at the dinner table or bedtime
- Share how they're growing personally through the Bible

When children grow up in homes where the Bible is read, discussed, and lived, it shapes their view of Scripture for life. Churches can support this by equipping parents with age-appropriate Bible reading plans, simple devotionals, and training on how to talk about Scripture naturally throughout the day. It sends a powerful message: God's Word matters for everyone, regardless of age.

These five practices aren't complex, but they are intentional. They remove common roadblocks and create new on-ramps for people to encounter God through his Word.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how churches can create a lasting culture where Bible engagement becomes second nature.

How to Create a Culture of the Word

The five practices we looked at in the last chapter lay the groundwork for a fresh, Bible-centered approach to discipleship. But if you really want to see lasting change in how your church makes disciples, it's going to take more than a new plan—you've got to shift the culture.

Culture is what people do consistently, not occasionally. It's what they come to expect, not what surprises them. If Bible engagement is going to move from a good idea to a defining feature of your church, it needs to be modeled, repeated, and celebrated over time.

1. Model it from the top

Leaders set the tone of a church. When pastors, elders, staff, and ministry leaders consistently share how they're engaging with God's Word—and how it's shaping them—it signals that Scripture matters. Leaders can't fake this. Congregants know when leaders are describing honest moments in the Word that are shaping their lives. Leaders can do this through:

- Referencing personal Bible study in sermons, not in the way that is arrogant or self-focused but overflowing from a passionate, consistent walk with Jesus through faithful study of the Bible.
- Sharing what God is teaching them in the Bible during meetings, as they tie vision, ministry decisions, and theological convictions to their own personal engagement with the Bible. (In other words, leaders are consistently demonstrating that decisions are made not on what “feels right” but on careful biblical reflection cultivated by the Holy Spirit.)
- Pointing to Scripture in casual, one-on-one conversation, helping congregants understand how their personal Scripture engagement leads to a transformative faith.

When leaders embody a love for God's Word, it gives others permission—and motivation—to follow.

2. Repeat the message in many places

Repetition is your friend when you're culture-building. A single sermon, Bible study, or even long-lasting campaign alone can't establish a new and lasting culture. The priority of Scripture engagement must become a repeated theme across multiple ministry areas, including your ministry with children, youth, small groups, ministry mobilization, etc.

When the message of engaging Scripture shows up consistently, it feels normal—and expected.

3. Celebrate Scripture engagement

Your church will do what your leaders celebrate. Share stories of people who have grown through consistent Bible reading. Highlight testimonies in worship services or online. Celebrate milestones like completing a reading plan or launching new Bible study groups.

You don't need to emphasize the dramatic. Sometimes, the most powerful witness is someone saying, "For the first time in my life, I've read the Bible every day for a month—and I can see how it's changing me."

You can't change a culture like this overnight. Word-based discipleship is a long-term endeavor that begins when the people of your church expect that the Bible is central to their Monday-to-Saturday lives. They begin to talk about it, ask questions about it, and encourage one another with it. And when that happens, the church becomes the kind of disciple-making community Jesus envisioned.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how tools like Logos can support this culture shift by making deep Bible study accessible to your congregation.

Empower Every Disciple with the Right Tools

The right practices will help your church build a Word-centered, disciple-creating culture, but your congregants will probably need some more help. Even when churches model, repeat, and celebrate Scripture engagement, many believers still need practical wisdom in order to know where to start—or how to go deeper.

That's where the digital right tools can help.

Why good tools matter

It's clear that one reason why average lay people struggle to engage Scripture regularly is that the text can feel distant from twenty-first-century life. And while the Holy Spirit is our ultimate guide, most of us need help to understand historical context, theological themes, and cross-references.

Tools that make deep study more accessible can change that. When believers are equipped with resources that bring the Bible to life, their confidence grows—and so does their love for God's Word.

Logos Bible study platform: a resource for the whole church

That's why tools like Logos can be so helpful. Logos brings together a powerful Bible study library, intuitive search tools, and custom reading plans into one easy-to-use platform. It helps people:

- Study Scripture in context with trusted commentaries and language tools
- Follow daily reading plans tailored to their goals and interests
- Prepare sermons, lessons, or devotionals with rich biblical depth
- Explore scriptural themes, word studies, and cross-references with clarity

And it's not just for pastors. Logos has something for everyone—whether you're brand new to reading the Bible and want some help building a consistent devotional habit, or you're a ministry leader who must be equipped to serve within the church.

When churches introduce their people to tools like Logos and show them how to use them in their everyday discipleship, it can make a big difference. It helps people get more out of their personal Bible reading, feel more prepared for small group discussions, and even engage more thoughtfully with the Sunday sermon.

Empowering, not replacing

Of course, apps can't replace the Spirit's work—or the relationships that form in true discipleship. But tools like Logos can remove roadblocks that keep people from accessing the Word for themselves.

Your goal isn't to teach your congregants to rely on digital tools. You want to empower every disciple in your congregation to open, read, and apply the Bible with conviction.

Think of these tools as fuel for the disciple-making movement God wants to bring into your church family!

In the final section of this guide, we'll dream a little bit about what your church could look like if the vision described in this guide takes hold.

What would happen if God's Word truly became the heartbeat—and the connecting tendons—of your congregation?

What If It Worked? A Vision for the Future

Imagine your church a year from now.

What if people no longer felt intimidated by the Bible, but drawn to it? What if reading and reflecting on Scripture became as normal as greeting each other in the hallway or sharing prayer requests? What if the Word of God wasn't merely referenced—but relied on? It's possible. It's within the reach of your church.

Churches that prioritize Scripture—week after week, relationship by relationship—don't only increase biblical literacy. They grow disciples. They create environments where faith is deepened, community is strengthened, and the gospel is clearly lived and proclaimed.

A picture of transformation

Imagine:

- Small groups where every discussion flows naturally from God's Word
- Families gathering around the Bible in their homes, building a spiritual legacy
- Leaders who make decisions with open Bibles and hearts aligned to Scripture
- A church culture where people ask, "What does the Bible say about this?" before anything else

When the Word takes root, fruit follows. You'll see deeper spiritual maturity. Stronger marriages. Bolder evangelism. More compassionate service. Not because people are trying harder—but because they're being shaped by truth.

Beyond your building: a church that blesses its community

When the Bible becomes central to a church's life, it reshapes neighborhoods and communities as it transforms individuals. Imagine what happens when a church full of Scripture-shaped disciples steps into the world:

- Business leaders operate with integrity, justice, and generosity.
- Educators teach with compassion and truth.
- Neighbors become peacemakers and bridge-builders.
- Volunteers serve out of a deep love for Jesus and their neighbors.

A Scripture-shaped church becomes salt and light in a fractured culture. It becomes known for more than worship or programs, but for the character of its people and the hope they bring

wherever they go. That's the kind of church that makes the world take notice—not for its size or style, but for its fruit.

Just start somewhere

Don't get overwhelmed. The vision above may seem a million miles away from your current context. Changes like this don't happen overnight.

But churches that never take the first step never reach the vision either.

Take a single step. Commit to prioritizing Scripture in your church's corporate life in a fresh way. Leverage great tools like Logos to help your congregants discover and apply the truths of Scripture more consistently.

You don't need a massive budget or flashy campaign. You need a vision and the resolve to take small, faithful steps forward.

Use the ideas in this guide to take that first step. Start small. Start now.

You won't find the future of your church's disciple-making in more events or by exerting more effort. You'll find it in the ancient, living, life-changing Word of God.

And that future can begin today.

Learn how Logos can equip your leaders to stem the discipleship crisis at your church at logos.com/church.