

# STAY *the* COURSE

*Seven Essential Practices for  
Disciple Making Churches*

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*foreword by* JIM PUTMAN





*Stay the Course*

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# 1

## ABIDE IN CHRIST

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If the goal of our journey is to make disciples of Jesus, we must first learn how to *abide in Christ—the first essential practice or guardrail in a disciple making church*. That is, before we can make healthy disciples, we must first *be* a healthy disciple.

This truth became clear to me one night when my wife, Amber, and I were with a group of friends who felt called to plant a church with us. While we talked about how to reach certain people groups and discussed strategies for bringing the gospel to them, one of our group members named Protus spoke up. He’s a great friend of mine from Kenya

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and he made a powerful statement during that discussion: “*If we are not first in prayer and in close relationship with Jesus, then we have nothing to bring our neighbors.*”

Oh how true that is! The church must first press into Jesus Christ. Before we can effectively minister to anyone around us, we must be in close relationship with Jesus, who will fill us with his grace and mercy as we extend grace and mercy to others.

The first protective guardrail is to *abide in Christ*. This skill is not always easy to understand, even after years in ministry. When I hear “abide in Christ,” I still sometimes think of a pristine park where I am supposed to sit in some deep, meditative state. Although there is nothing wrong with a practice like this, it doesn’t give us the whole picture. We can understand abiding more completely by looking at the agricultural concept of grafting branches.

Grafting branches from one grapevine to another is a common practice in developing a thriving vineyard. Winemakers use this process to cultivate healthier plants by removing a branch from a vine that is susceptible to disease, and joining it to a disease-resistant vine. They also use grafting to protect branches from insects, which

may damage the root system of one vine but not the other. The grafting process produces more abundant and higher quality fruit.

Jesus gives us an incredible metaphor of a vine and branches to represent our relationship with him in John 15. Much like branches that are grafted to a vibrant vine in order to produce better grapes, we are grafted to Christ, who is our life-giving vine. A branch flourishes and produces fruit when it remains connected to a healthy vine. We too will flourish and become fruitful when we remain in close relationship with Christ, our source of spiritual health and life.

A branch cut from an unhealthy vine will not produce any fruit at all, unless it is connected to a healthy vine. Likewise, Jesus says that if we do not remain connected to him, we can do nothing (John 15:4). Andrew Murray, a nineteenth-century pastor, wrote in his book *Abide in Christ*, “The great secret of abiding in Christ is the deep conviction that we are nothing, and he is everything.”

Abiding is essential for making disciples. That’s our calling as the branches. In fact, it encompasses *all* we are called to do. We must spend time with Jesus in prayer, learn to love and apply his Word, and listen to the Holy Spirit who flows through us as we remain connected to Christ

and his Word. When we abide in these ways, God will produce fruit in us (John 15:5).

It is not the job of the branch to produce fruit. The vine provides everything the branch needs. In another of his books, *The True Vine*, Murray assures us, “You are the branch. You need be nothing more. You need not for one single moment of the day take upon you the responsibility of the Vine. You need not leave the place of entire dependence and unbounded confidence.”

Abiding in Jesus will, of course, always lead to action, but the abiding must come first. When we abide, the Holy Spirit will fill us and prompt us to act. Likewise, we must also prioritize this with the church, calling them to abide in Jesus. This is vital, because the abundant fruit Jesus produces when we remain close to him is becoming healthy disciples ourselves and then making healthy disciples of others.

I’ve had many discussions with various church staff members over the years, and I have often asked the question, “How do you and your team discuss your personal walk with Jesus?” The most common reply is, “We don’t.” I do not think it is by chance that, as leaders, many of us falter in our ability to make healthy disciples or to lead a healthy disciple making church because we do



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not discuss or put priority on the most important practice of all—abiding in Christ. How can we truly walk in relationship with each other and with God without sharing personal victories and struggles?

Before Jesus sends us to save a group of hurting people, he first teaches us to walk intimately with him and to be in close relationship with those on our own team. Maybe you have not established this as an intentional guardrail and you find yourself off course or in the ditch. Have you taken the different path, one called, “do things for christ,” rather than, “abide in Christ”? It’s time to accept the truth that the only thing you must do is stay connected to Jesus. He is responsible for all the outcomes!



## Take Action

### *Read*

Open your Bible and read John 15:5-6.

### *Reflect*

Consider these questions for yourself, and then discuss them with your team:

1. Am I too busy *doing* for Christ rather than *abiding* in Him?
2. What does it look like for me as a leader to abide in Christ?
3. How can I encourage my leaders to abide in Christ?
4. What must we stop or start doing to build an abiding-in-Christ culture within our team?
5. How can we encourage those in our church or organization to abide in Christ?

### *Act*

Make time in the next few days to actively meditate on Christ's words in John 15:5-6 as

you draw insights and energy from him to  
make disciples.

