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# Sinkholes and Potholes

## Dangers and Barriers to Effective Disciplemaking

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# Sinkholes and Potholes

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**Sinkholes are big.**



**Potholes are smaller.**

Having been born and raised in Florida, sinkholes were regularly in the news. CBS recently carried the story of a central Florida subdivision where at least a dozen new sinkholes opened up in a single week. The danger is enormous, threatening to swallow up entire homes.

Similar dangers can threaten your disciplemaking initiatives. I want to share several things for which you should be on alert.

## SINKHOLES

### 1. Theological Error

A pastor friend of mine leads a large multi-level disciplemaking movement with thousands of believers. While visiting us in southern California he received a report that a leg of his organization had begun teaching a doctrine that denied the deity of Christ. He immediately jumped on a plane and flew to his mission assignment to attend to this issue. **Theological error or heresy** is what much of the New Testament was written to correct. We shouldn't be surprised, but ready to make needed corrections. As group members search for truth and understanding of scripture, it's expected of course, that numerous ideas and opinions will emerge. Because *Discipleship Essentials* is biblically based, most errant thinking will be corrected by the group. The Holy Spirit has a way of preserving truth for those who honestly seek it. Some debatable issues will arise that are best left unsolved. But, a quote attributed to early church fathers said,

"IN ESSENTIALS UNITY, IN NON-ESSENTIALS LIBERTY, IN ALL THINGS CHARITY."

In a recent quad a church elder revealed that he was unsure about the inspiration of scripture. Though very involved in the church since childhood, this church elder never had a "safe place" to express his doubts and to get helpful feedback. Offering an additional study aid like *God Wrote a Book* by James MacDonald, was able to reassure his flagging faith. Another highly intelligent quad member often questioned accepted biblical beliefs. Another quad member gave him a



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copy of Norm Geisler's book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*. When I saw him a short time later, the doubter said he never knew there was so much evidence for what we believe.

## 2. Process Degeneration

A second challenge that church initiatives face is **process degeneration**. That's when people, not understanding the crucial value of certain system components, decide to take short cuts. We had a group that decided to forgo the memorization of scripture. They didn't realize how crucial scripture memory is to effective discipling. Many of the designated scripture passages require daily rehearsal to be accurately quoted at the next weekly session. Keeping God's Word fresh in our minds and hearts throughout the week allows the Holy Spirit to bring clarity and real-life application in us.

Discipling is time consuming. That's why some pastors hesitate to venture into the process. They don't recognize the value of going slow and investing in a few. One pastor decided to use *Discipleship Essentials* as the basis for a sermon series, hoping his congregation would be able to develop and grow simultaneously. *Discipleship Essentials* makes a great sermon series, but thinking that preaching it will make mature disciples is naïve. Preaching is often just information transfer. As Dr. Greg often reminds us, the greatest preacher in the world did not depend on preaching to make disciples. Focusing on a few assures time for personal development; making sure that even the slowest member of the group does not get left behind. It allows you to pace the learning process at the speed of the learners, giving the Holy Spirit opportunity to bring about authentic growth.

Even expanding groups to five or six will minimize adequate verbal interchange. That is why we recommend four to a group. We've found that an essential part of learning is vocalizing the truths that are being absorbed by the heart. When you hear yourself stating truths, they are remembered longer and lodge deeper. Not being on a schedule for completion permits stopping when needed to deal with personal issues.

A member of one of my groups sat down as our weekly gathering started. He looked exhausted. One man commented, "Hey, what's up with you?" His response, "I think Pammy and I are done." He went on to explain that he was shopping for an apartment and preparing to move out of his house. Strife at home had become unbearable. We put down our books that day and spent the whole session counseling and encouraging our brother regarding his marriage. In fact, we spent the better part of the sessions for several weeks helping him work through issues. On the last Sunday of my ministry at Camarillo Community Church, Ed and Pam were on the front row. When the moderator of this special service asked for people to share how the ministry of Ralph and Jackie Rittenhouse had effected them, Ed was the first one to his feet. "My wife and I would not be here today if it were not for the discipleship quad that I was in with Pastor Ralph." Because there were only four of us in the group and we had no rush to keep on a schedule, we took the time



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to help Ed save his marriage. Forming people in Christ is a slow work, *but it is too important to be hurried, and too critical to be delayed.* It is too essential to rush; too crucial to put off.

## 3. Mixing Genders

Another classic mistake is trying to **mix genders**. Obviously, men want their wives to grow and women want their husbands to grow. When they find something they think will help them, they want their spouse to enjoy it too. But, gender specificity is critical to discussing issues that need to be dealt with. One man told me that he and his wife discuss everything together. I told him that was great, but he wasn't going to be discussing everything with my wife present. Men need to talk about men's issues and women need to discuss women's issues, and they need the freedom to talk about these things unhindered by mixed company. The presence of mixed company will impede open and honest discussion. I find frequently when men feel safe, their struggle with things like pornography surface. Men need to talk about these things if authentic change is going to occur.

Open groups are also a problem. Once the group has begun and people begin to feel safe, adding outsiders deters openness and honesty.

## 4. Hijackers

We had someone volunteer to be a leader and then took the group off in a totally different direction. She wanted to use one of Oprah's book as the text. Being careful with leader selection is critical in the beginning. If a person has never been in a group, there is a danger in misunderstanding the leader role. Some see it as an opportunity to exercise their teaching gift, and suddenly they are no longer just a facilitator. One of the great benefits of the discipling quad is the advantage of four teachers. Each member listens to the Holy Spirit as they prepare for the weekly meeting, and then share the insights that they individually learned. In Colossians 3:16 the Apostle Paul said, *"Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives."* We consider the Holy Spirit the real teacher in each group. The group members learn from him through their own study of the Word, and through the voices and lives of the others in the group.

## 5. Intentional Reproduction Failure

From the very beginning, intentional reproduction needs to be in focus. Discipleship is about *you*. It's about your growth into the likeness of Christ; becoming more loving, generous, faithful, and gaining additional Bible knowledge. Disciplemaking, however, is about *others*. It is about helping others grow into the likeness of Christ. Jesus was not just about making disciples, he was about making disciplemakers. With only three years to leave his impact on them, Jesus spent the



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majority of his time with the twelve. Near the end of his ministry on earth, Jesus said to his disciples, *“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”* (Jn 20:21) Our groups are about becoming disciplemakers. Now, yes, like begets like. You do need to become these things in order to better help others grow into them. But, knowing multiplication is the ultimate objective needs to be clear from the start. We always encourage taking turns leading the group.

After five or six weeks of modeling by the group convener, others in the group are generally ready to facilitate. There is a Leaders’ Guide beginning on page 222 of *Discipleship Essentials*. Everyone should become familiar with it, and as the group nears the end of the curriculum, it should be completely digested. Some still might be hesitant. I call this **POSTPONED OBEDIENCE** - but I was taught that you give up the right to say “no” to Jesus when you begin following him.

If you do not do what he says, do not trick yourself into thinking you are following Him.

*“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.”* (John 15:9-10) *“Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). *“Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them”* (John 14:21).

## Proficiency of the Microgroup

- An incubator for initial development
- A hospital for care and recovery
- A hothouse for personal growth
- A gymnasium to develop strength and power
- A deployment center to launch into service

To go and make disciples is commanded service. Obedience is not an option for an authentic Christ follower.

## 6. Ministry Distractions

A very thoughtful and experienced pastor asked me at a training session, “What did you have to give up to make room on your activities calendar?” I had to think for a moment, and then I responded dramatically, “We had to cancel **Christmas!**” That sounds far out, but let me explain.



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Initially, we were an attraction-oriented church and Christmas offered a great opportunity to produce something that would attract lots of people. We had a wonderful gal, Cheryl, on our staff, with years of extraordinary production experience. We had become widely known for our Christmas spectaculars. This was the biggest event on our calendar, and it was an “all skate” – everyone was expected to participate. There were singers and dancers, band members and actors in the production. We also needed promotion, ticket sales, parking attendants, ushers, and stage crew.

The participants needed meals and childcare, and we were all challenged to pray fervently for our non-churched friends and neighbors, and to make sure they came to the event. Planning began in the summer. Rehearsals for the music and drama gobbled up everyone’s spare time in October and November. Six to eight performances in early December brought in thousands of attendees and hundreds of “response-card decisions.”

We were a couple of years into our new disciplemaking initiative, when I sat down with our imminently talented Christmas production director. I had exciting new ideas of how to make this next Christmas the best ever. After an animated presentation of my ideas, I waited for her enthusiastic response, but...she was strangely quiet. Then she told me she would like to pray about it, and get back to me. I admit, I was somewhat deflated. Later that week I got a call. She wanted to meet for lunch to talk about Christmas. When I arrived at the small Mexican restaurant, I saw she had brought her husband Joe with her (I later realized it was for moral support). “I don’t think I can do the Christmas program this year,” she began. “And, I don’t think you should either.” (SHOCK) “Last year most of us had to cancel our disciplemaking efforts during October and November, and December is a hard month anyway.

I’m having a wonderful time with the ladies in my disciplemaking quad and they are really starting to grow. If I cancel for three months, it could be devastating. If we are truly serious about making disciples, as you say we are, we have to do things differently.” Now I was really disappointed. My own staff member was preaching my message back to me. But, she was right. When we analyzed our results, we found that most of those who filled our thousand-seat auditorium were from other churches.

We were providing Christian entertainment. And, most of those who recorded decisions, we never saw again. Yes, there were some valuable results of our enormous outreach efforts, but we later found that we could realize most of them without sacrificing three months of disciplemaking. We canceled our giant Christmas event that year, and then made adjustments that allowed us to keep Christ’s priority our priority.

We also began to evaluate all our activities and programs against the priority of intentional disciplemaking. We even began to adjust our budget expenditures by that same grid.



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## 7. Satan

*“For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).*

There are Christ followers today who are facing wicked and violent resistance and persecution. There are evil rulers and authorities with mighty power in this dark world. But, Satan is also subtle and cunning, even able to influence one the chosen twelve. We dare not forget that this is a spiritual battle we are in. We would be foolish not to expect interference from his side. When Paul finishes describing the various parts of the armor of God, he exhorts us to

*“Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion.” (Ephesians 6:18)*

If we are serious about making disciples, we need to be serious about prayer. There is an enemy for which prayer is our primary defense.

## 8. Loss of Focus

The challenge of building a disciplemaking church cultural requires endurance. To see disciplemaking become a part of the identity of the church demands (to borrow a phrase) “a long obedience in the same direction.” In our “everything-needs-to-happen-tomorrow society,” installing a new ministry paradigm is nearly impossible. New values and practices need to rerouted in the life of the church. This may prove to be a long, spiritual battle.

For the lead/senior pastor particularly, this has to be a major focus. There is so much on the plate of this leader already, when the “fires” come, it will seem like all the mental and spiritual energy will be consumed just trying to survive. When the plate is full all of it seems of equal importance. It is very easy to lose your way. As was previously mentioned and worth the repetition, having a coach who knows how to help you keep the main thing, the main thing will be invaluable.

### **Discussion:**

Which of the sinkholes have you experienced? How would you or did you address them?





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## POT HOLES

Whereas sinkholes have the power to gobble up your discipling ministry, potholes are merely small bumps along the way.

### 9. Excuses

One of the first potholes that we encounter is **excuses**. These are reasons or explanations put forward to defend or justify a lack of response to God's clear commands. "I don't have the time," is one. What they often really mean is that they don't have the commitment. Jesus encountered a man that insisted that he had to go bury his father first – he had other priorities. An excuse may be the immediate response, but let the Holy Spirit do his work. Make the ask; explain the process; share the beneficial impact on your own life.

And remember, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. But, you can salt his oats. I invited a man to join my new group and he said he didn't have the time, then. Six months later he approached me and said he was now able to participate. He had been honest with me. His schedule had been too full earlier, but he truly did want to participate. He completed my quad and is now leading a group.

### 10. Scheduling

We live busy lives. Coordinating schedules can be a real challenge. Men are often available at early morning times, before work. Six in the morning has proven to be a desirable time for many of my groups. Women at home with children often like to get together just after they get the kids off to school. Sometimes lunch breaks or evening times work out better.

What do you do when people's schedules are interrupted or change? This requires a group response, but can often be solved by changing the time of day or day of the week. If one person of the quad is going out of town for the week, I will sometimes meet without them. Since I always try to work with groups of four, three still works well. If the person who misses is a young believer, I might meet with them alone to review missed material. If they are a mature believer, I encourage them to be sure to cover the material by themselves. If two are going to be gone, we just take a week off.

### 11. Unwillingness to Sign the Covenant

If someone is hesitant to sign the covenant, I let them explain why. It may simply be a little daunting to see themselves as a leader. When Jeff joined my group, he was admittedly a novice,



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very young in his faith. He and his wife had become believers very late in life and he always felt a bit behind. He needed to be reassured. When I told him I thought he would be a great disciplemaker one day, he was visibly encouraged. He had worked with men in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) for years. He had already been discipling men. He just didn't call it that. As the group progressed, he dutifully took his turn facilitating the discussion. When we completed the curriculum, he was the first to start a new group.

When Lori joined her women's group, she signed the covenant, but later admitted she never thought she would be able to lead her own group. She got so excited about what God was doing in her life, she did not even wait to finish the basic curriculum before she started her own group.

## 12. Won't Do Homework

Rick was a businessman almost of retirement age, but still traveled a lot. Also, he and his wife were raising their wayward daughter's three-year-old. He caught me in the parking lot before going into Denny's for our quad. "Ralph, can I audit this group; just come and listen? I really don't have time to do the homework." He continued to explain to me the demands on his time, and I was sympathetic. I said we would talk to the other men when we got inside. As we sat down, I let him explain his situation to the other members of the group.

At first there was silence, but then the others in the group shared their own challenges. It quickly became clear, they were not about to let him off. No way! If we're going to do the work, so are you. I was surprised but gratified that Rick took the challenge and never missed doing his homework again. The mutual accountability of these groups is one of their great strengths. The members can often speak stronger than the leader. When someone is not adhering to the covenant, not showing up on time or failing to memorize the verses, allowing others in the group to determine the restitution or consequence required may be all that's needed.

## 13. Won't Memorize Verses

Ok, what about memorizing the verses? Yes, some have more trouble with this than others. But, scripture memory is a critical part of life transformation. Usually, it is not just one verse, but several. This requires that you begin working on the verse early in the week. Reviewing it once each morning and then again at night is what I recommend. You want the verse to permeate your life, influence your thoughts and actions.

Memorizing the verses may actually be of more value than answering all the questions and reading the notes. Scripture memory trains our minds to see things from God's perspective. It allows the Holy Spirit to transform us in accordance to God's Word.



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Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary reportedly made the statement that if it were his decision, every student graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary would be required to learn one thousand verses word perfect before they graduated.

*“When we tell you these things, we do not use words that come from human wisdom. Instead, we speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit’s words to explain spiritual truths.” (1 Corinthians 2:13)*

So, what are some ways to help those who find this a difficult challenge? Well, memory cards often work. Write the verse out on a card, carry it with you all week, reviewing it several times a day. I like to write out the first letter of each word on a card, and then force myself to read it repeatedly with only the letters.

## 14. Vacations

Though *Discipleship Essentials* has 25 lessons, no one is expected to complete the curriculum in 25 weeks. In fact, a year is more likely and many take 18 months or more. What is most important is the life transformation that takes place in the highly accountable relationships of a gender-specific quad, focused on God’s Word. Disciplemaking is not calendar driven, its transformation driven. There will be times when you won’t be able to meet. Taking a week off is not precarious, though two might cause a loss of momentum and cohesion. We encourage meeting weekly in order to build consistent spiritual disciplines and facilitate necessary intimacy and trust.

## 15. Absenteeism

If a quad member is delinquently absent, the leader may need to meet privately with the individual to review the covenant and access the reason. It is possible life circumstances have changed making participation impossible. Or, maybe commitment is the issue and you may need to offer a gracious “off-ramp”. If someone has to miss for legitimate reasons, you may need to spend time with them individually to help them catch up, or you could also ask another group member to help them.

My wife has a quad consisting of three stay-at-home moms. All three have multiple adopted children. Because of the recent Covid 19 pandemic, these moms have been greatly challenged with home schooling issues. Each week has presented unique scheduling problems. All the women enjoy the quad sessions together, maybe more so because much of their day lacks adult interaction. Some weeks, the ninety minutes has to be cut to one hour.



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Other weeks have been skipped altogether. None of this is because of lack of desire or commitment, but valid availability struggles. I suspect that this group will eventually complete the curriculum, but they will also have learned from each other how to prioritize their own spiritual growth needs.

## 16. Can't Find People to Populate New Groups

Jesus spent all night in prayer before selecting the twelve. Certainly this should be our first step. I often say, the church in America is a giant reservoir of unemployed disciplemakers, just waiting for someone to come along and show them how. Jesus chose ordinary men, right off the street, and turned them into world changers. John was a guy like that. He was employed by our church. When he came to apply for the job, he brought his "rap sheet" with him. He had been deep into drugs before coming to Jesus. Now he was clean and sober, had been for a few years, but he didn't want any surprises for his new employer.

He got the job and was working on the church maintenance team. When I met him, he had risen to become leader of that team. But he was still young spiritually. I invited him to become part of my discipleship quad and he agreed. I think John was a bit hesitant at first to join a group with two pastors and another longtime believer. But, as the four of us met weekly, all of us were growing. When we finished our basic discipleship curriculum. John didn't hesitate to begin his own discipleship quad. That one finished and now he has started another one. Let God help you choose your group. In *Discipleship Essentials* on p. 222 there is a Leader's Guide which contains additional instructions for creating a group.

## 17. Conflict with Small Groups

Most churches today have some kind of a small group ministry. Realizing that all needs cannot be met on Sunday morning or by the pastor, churches institute small groups to help people belong and grow. Small groups do an excellent job at that. People do make friends and build crucial relationships. And, there are many helpful curriculums to assist church members to grow. The advantage of our gender-specific quad is that they allow for much greater transparency and honesty.

And, with only four people in the group, there is a much higher degree of participation and accountability. No one hides in a group of four. Everyone has opportunity to speak. We never encourage churches to drop their small group ministry, but rather, to add the disciplemaking opportunity for those who want to go deeper. The ultimate goal for every Christ follower is to become a spiritual parent; one who is helping others grow in Christ likeness.



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## 18. Leaders Who Hesitate to Get on Board

If a church takes seriously the Great Commission of our Lord, it is important that discipling be modeled by all in leadership. “You can’t teach what you don’t know, and you can’t lead where you won’t go.” Now, there are other ways to make disciples, but if the other method does not include helping people learn to become reproducing disciples themselves, they fall short. As I said earlier, there is a difference between discipleship and discipling. Jesus modeled discipling, and commissioned us to make disciples in all the world. That won’t happen if we don’t intentionally make multiplying disciples. Without multiplication, we will not reach the world. The Apostle Paul said, “*You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.*” (2 Tim 2:2)

One way to get late-adopters to buy in is to let them “taste the fruit.” Let me illustrate: Some time ago I visited an apple farm in Bellingham, Washington. In the gift shop, they had a counter with apples available to taste. I was intrigued. I have a number of apple trees in my own yard at home. They had five different varieties available. Most, I was familiar with, but one apple, I didn’t recognize. It was an Orin apple. I had never even heard of an Orin apple.

But, I liked it; I liked it the best. The texture was crisp and the flavor was strong and sweet. I said to the woman behind the counter, “I don’t want to buy any of your Orin apples. I want to buy an Orin apple tree.” I was politely told that they didn’t sell apple trees, and that I would unfortunately have to look somewhere else. The point of this story is, that many people will hesitate to buy the tree until they have tasted the fruit. Once they see the results of discipling quads using *Discipleship Essentials*, and the authentic transformation that results, most will want to try it.

### **Discussion:**

Which of these would you like to talk about in more depth?

Have you experienced other potholes that are not this list?

Describe. How did you handle it or them?

