



Ancient Disciple-Making

Why Embracing Church History Makes Strong Disciples Today

INTRODUCTION

There is a major gap in contemporary western Christianity. The gap is how disconnected we are from the riches of Christian history.

Many Christians mistakenly believe that everything new is better and everything old (or ancient) is outdated. Too often, ideas and practices that originated in a time or place other than our nation and tradition are considered irrelevant or even suspect.

This faulty way of thinking has done great damage to our discipleship, our leadership, and our witness in the world. When we fail to consider the contributions of the global and ancient church, **we unnecessarily cut ourselves off from the riches of church history.**

British historian David W. Bebbington summarizes well the wonderful strengths of the Protestant evangelical movement that traces its roots back to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, and its development and global expansion through Pietism, Puritanism, and the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bebbington describes the strengths of evangelicalism as:

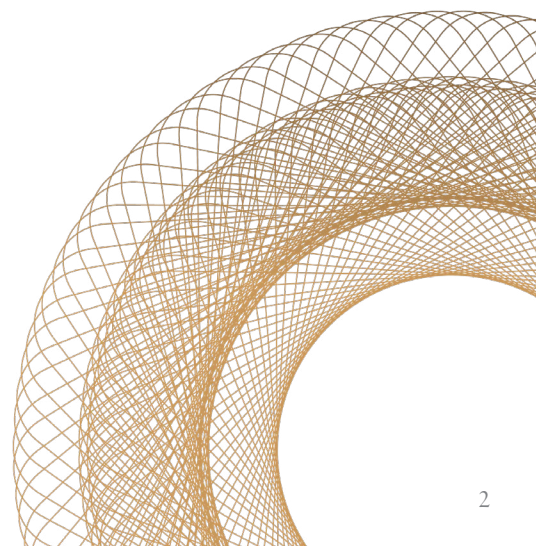
- A commitment to lead people to a personal relationship with Jesus.
- An emphasis on actively reaching the world.
- A deep conviction of the Scriptures as the Word of God.
- A focus on the cross of Jesus Christ.⁽¹⁾

I love our evangelical stream in Christian history and would not have become a pastor, leader, or a writer without it. Yet, without deep roots in the ancient discipling practices of our faith, we have unwittingly focused on spiritual activity itself as the primary path to Christian maturity and growth. This has resulted in Christ-followers and churches without much depth, which means we're very busy trying to give away truths we have not lived.

It's time we recover the ancient way of discipling. Doing so requires traveling to territory outside the evangelical Protestant tradition and learning from Christians very different from ourselves. And we can and must do so without losing the distinctives and gifts we bring to the global church and her mission.

Even if you're not a great lover of history, I pray what you discover about our Christian heritage on the pages that follow will impact your life and leadership as profoundly as it has mine.

Blessings,
Pete Scazzero
Co-Founder, Emotionally Healthy Discipleship



TWO CHURCH SPLITS THAT STILL IMPACT US TODAY

Church Split 1

The Great Schism of the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054

A complex set of political, cultural, linguistic, and theological tensions had been building for centuries but finally erupted when the bishop in Rome changed the Nicene Creed without consulting leaders of the other churches. He also declared himself infallible in matters of doctrine and faith. In response, leaders from the other four cities excommunicated him. He, in turn, excommunicated them. This resulted in the Western church being led from Rome and the Eastern church being led from Constantinople. Where you lived determined which church you belonged to.

This was followed by the military Crusades of the Roman Catholic Church that began in the late eleventh century. In addition to retaking Jerusalem from the Muslims, they also attacked and pillaged Eastern churches along the way. The besieging and sacking of Constantinople's (present-day Istanbul) churches, convents, and monasteries in 1204 inflicted a deep and painful wound that has not fully healed to this day. In fact, leaders of the Eastern and Western churches didn't speak to each other for over 900 years.

Church Split 2

The Protestant Reformation in 1517

The corruption and decline of the Roman Catholic Church led to the Protestant Reformation of 1517. Among other things, Protestantism replaced the authority of the Pope with the authority of Scripture. Now, each person was empowered to interpret the Bible as they saw fit.

Since 1517, the Protestant church has experienced over 300,000 splits.

Here's how a Russian Orthodox priest in my neighborhood sums up the Orthodox view of Protestants and church history: "Pete, I am really glad you found faith in college. But now it is time to come home to Orthodoxy. We have never left the apostolic faith. But you are outside the true church. Come back to your roots." (The church history chart on the following page offers an Orthodox perspective of church history.)⁽³⁾

FOUR TRUTHS OF CHURCH HISTORY

When I was in seminary, we spent a lot of time looking at the problems of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. But in our rush to point fingers, we failed to acknowledge four truths of church history that sometimes shine a less-than-flattering light on our own tradition.

Truth 1:

The first 1,054 years of church history belong to all of us—Roman Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, and emerging independent churches.

I meet many Christians who ignore this history, acting as if God jumped from the book of Acts to the Protestant Reformation. They also tend to assume that Christians who are not evangelical or charismatic Protestants are probably aren't truly Christian. However, the writers of the Nicene Creed declared that any church claiming to be the only true church is heretical. The church of the first 1,054 years is our church family, warts and all.

Truth 2:

Evangelicals have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in other traditions.

We are not the whole church. True believers are those who have a living relationship with Jesus Christ, and believe he died and rose again for our sins. They do not have to attend our church or be in our tradition. There is much we can learn from believers in the other major streams of Christianity, even though they, too, have their own problems and we do not agree on everything.

A few examples of lessons we can learn from those in other traditions include:

- Jesus started a movement, not an institution.
- Theology matters (just look at the first 300 years of the church).
- At its best, Christianity esteems the marginalized, including the enslaved, the poor, the oppressed, the elderly, women, and children.
- Christianity has always been mission-focused, whether it was Asian Christian expansion among Arabs and Persians, outreach to the pagan tribes of Europe, or spreading out into Africa.
- Christianity has always spread most effectively among the common people—those who reside on the margins rather than in centers of power, prosperity, wealth, and comfort.

Truth 3:

God is moving around the world in ways far beyond the reach of our plans and strategies.

We must recognize that there are now over 432 million new, independent Christians in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, who do not consider themselves related to Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, or Orthodoxy. This movement is so massive and so culturally and linguistically different from Western Christianity that numerous scholars now consider it a fourth branch of the church. This means the global centers of the church have moved away from cities in North America and Europe to multiple new centers, such as Manila, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Kampala. We have much to learn!⁽⁴⁾

This shift from the global North (North America and Europe) to the global South (Asia, Africa, Latin America) marks a monumental change in Christianity. In 1900, 83 percent of the world's Christians lived in North America and Europe. By the 2050, it's predicted that 77 percent of Christians will live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—and over 30 percent of them will be Pentecostal or Charismatic.

Truth 4:

As evangelicals, we have our own dirty laundry and blind spots.

Here are just a few examples.

- Martin Luther was notoriously anti-Semitic and also wrote essays advising German nobles to slaughter rebelling peasants without mercy.
- Ulrich Zwingli, a sixteenth-century Swiss theologian, condoned the torture and drowning of

Anabaptists—some of them his own former students—because they practiced adult baptism rather than child baptism.

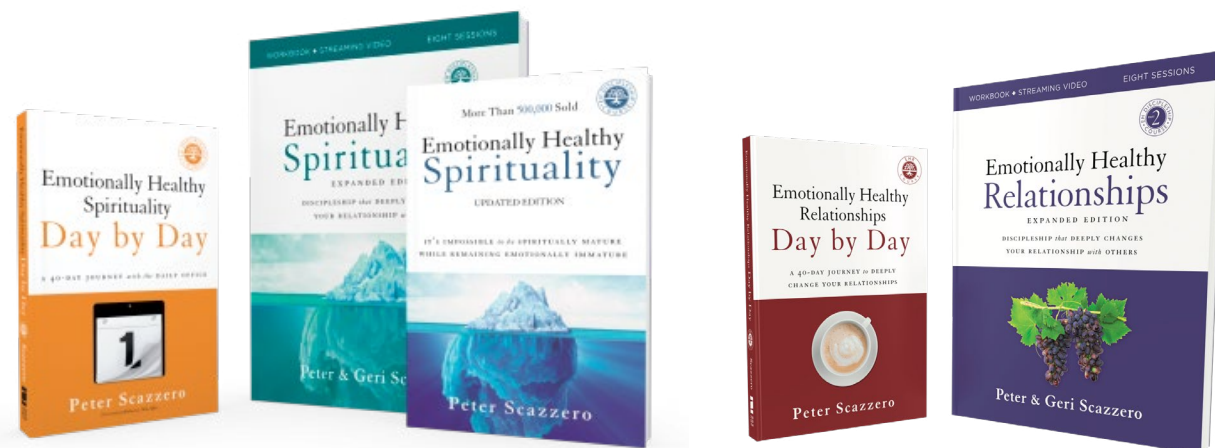
- Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield, leaders in the First Great Awakening in the American Colonies, were slaveholders. African-American believers in our church have asked me if they were really Christian!
- The great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Azusa Street (1906) in Los Angeles split terribly over race, resulting in decades of church segregation throughout the US.
- Many leaders of the Protestant missionary movement that began in the eighteenth century and continues today have failed in their marriage and family life. John Wesley, for example, couldn't live with his wife; their marriage was, by all accounts, deeply troubled. And the scandals among contemporary evangelical leaders in recent decades are too numerous to mention.
- We are often more secular than biblical, looking first to marketplace strategies rather than to biblical principles and the Holy Spirit's guidance to grow our churches.

I love our branch of the church and all the gifts evangelicalism brings to accomplishing Jesus' mission in the world. But evangelicalism also has a shadow side that resists learning from those who have gone before us over the last 2,000 years. And it is this narrow approach that contributes to the shallow spirituality evident in many of our churches.

If we are to introduce our people to a discipleship that deeply changes lives, we must learn from Christians very different than us, from those with a long history of expertise in areas where we as evangelicals are weak. The challenge is to do this while still holding firmly to our unique strengths and contributions.

INTEGRATING ANCIENT DISCIPLE-MAKING INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

After almost three decades of research, development, and testing, we gathered the core components of what we believed was missing in contemporary discipleship to create [*The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course: Part 1 and Part 2*](#). Part 1 focuses on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, and Part 2 on Emotionally Healthy Relationships. Both eight-week courses provide an introductory experience of deep discipleship with Jesus.



The goals of this two-part course are to change the culture of our churches toward deep discipleship and to train a new generation of leaders in a broader, richer, and more ancient spirituality so they can lead out of a deep inner life with Jesus.



Are you ready to discover this ancient path to discipling? Begin today by diving into *The Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course*. You can be trained via our website ([emotionally healthy.org/course](http://emotionallyhealthy.org/course)) or be mentored in the course first by attending our School of Emotionally Healthy Leadership (emotionallyhealthy.org/school).

Two Ways to Start

<p>1</p> <p>Start Today</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Buy the Course Pack• Run a Course Pilot (access our video training) <p>emotionally healthy.org/course</p>	<p>2</p> <p>Start at our School for Leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High-Level Leadership Mentoring via Zoom• Apply for Fall or Spring <p>emotionally healthy.org/school</p>
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FOOTNOTES

1 - David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman), 1989; Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003); Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement, Volume 2*.

2 - My good friend, a global church historian and Dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that a fourth division exists –The Spiritual Churches of Africa, China, and Brazil. He writes, “Other Spiritual churches that formed in the early decades of the 20th century were not technically Pentecostal in experience or theology, but they also started up independent of established churches (Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox Church) finding their inspiration directly from biblical witness and the Holy Spirit... Spiritual Churches, it can be argued, have been the main story in the transformation of the world Christian movement in the 20th century. See Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Press), 2015.

3 - See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2011; Scott Sunquist, *The Shape of Christian History: Continuity and Diversity in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), 2022; Tim C. Tennet, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 249-272.

4 - See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Third Edition (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011); Scott Sunquist, *The Shape of Christian History: Continuity and Diversity in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022); Tim C. Tennet, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

APPENDIX A

THE NICENE CREED

We believe¹ in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father², God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father³.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man⁴.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]⁵.

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified⁶.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church⁷.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins⁸.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

AMEN.

THE NICENE CREED - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

For the first three centuries, the church found itself in a hostile environment, threatened both by persecution from the outside and ideas that were in conflict with Scripture. In the New Testament, for example, we observe Paul exhorting Timothy to “keep the pattern of sound teaching” he had received (2 Tim. 1:13) and to protect the truth from error. This developed in the first three centuries into a variety of creeds, the most famous being **The Apostle’s Creed**.

When Constantine became emperor in 312 AD, he discovered that the empire was fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicts over the nature of Jesus Christ. Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, had argued that Jesus was created by God, and not fully God. This began to split the church and thus the empire. As a result, Constantine summoned a council of bishops from all over the empire to settle doctrine for the entire church. This resulted in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325. A second council of bishops met in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) in A.D. 381 to revise and expand this to affirm what we now know as the final version of the Nicene Creed.

What makes the Nicene Creed so important is that it defines orthodox Christian faith for over 1600 years. The three main branches of the Christian Church - Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic - agree that this “rule of faith” provides the boundaries of Christian belief and provides a measure, or rule, for the proper reading of Scripture.

Every day millions of Christians recite this exceptionally compressed creed where each word was intentionally chosen and packed with meaning. The Nicene Creed invites us to reflect on radical nature of what we truly believe about our God and the large vision of what He is doing in human history.

THE NICENE CREED - NOTATIONS

1 - “We believe” – This says that in the creed we profess the convictions that bind us together as a community. We stand together and recite them. We are a people defined by these words and truths.

2 - “eternally begotten of the Father” – From this point, the language about Jesus is directed to clarify that He was, in the fullest sense of the word, God. They piled phrase upon phrase, most drawn from Scripture, but some not, to assert a simple, but infinitely difficult truth: Jesus is the **“only-begotten Son” of God.**” This language and understanding comes out of John 1:1,2,14, that Jesus was not made by the Father as part of creation, but is rather an extension of the Father’s own existence. This is not a making by God but a sharing by the Father out of himself.

3 - “one in being” asserting the unity of the Father and the Son.

4 - This is the heart of the creed. The all-powerful Creator of the universe entered our humanity and our history – for our salvation.

5 - “who proceeds from the Father and the Son” – this short statement continues to be a source of tension between the Eastern Church and Western Church. It was one of the explicit causes of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox Christians in A.D. 1054.

6 - “the Holy Spirit” is also worshipped and glorified. He is not only a power but a person and is to be thought of in the same manner as the Father and the Son.

7 - “one holy catholic and apostolic church” – The word catholic means universal (not the Roman Catholic church). It refers to the reality that the church of Jesus exists around the world and not simply in one denomination or local church.

8 - “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” – Eph. 4:4-5 states there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” While salvation is by grace through faith alone, all agree baptism is an essential mark of our leaving of the world, receiving of forgiveness and becoming part of the church of Jesus Christ.

A SHORT CHURCH HISTORY READING LIST

Church History in Plain Language, 4th edition - Bruce L. Shelly

The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks (Penguin Classics) - Benedicta Ward

History of the World Christian Movement: Earliest Christianity to 1453 - Dale Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist

History of the World Christian Movement, Vol. 2: Modern Christianity from 1454-1800 - Dale Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist

Church History: An Essential Guide - Justo L. Gonzalez

Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith, Revised Edition with Updated Epilogue - Peter Gillquist

The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity - 1900-2000 Scott W. Sunquist

ABOUT PETE SCAZZERO



After leading New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York, for twenty-six years, Pete Scazzero co-founded [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship](#) with his wife Geri. Emotionally Healthy Discipleship is a groundbreaking ministry whose goal is to transform church culture by multiplying deeply-changed leaders and disciples for the sake of Jesus' mission in the world.

Pete hosts the top-ranked, [Emotionally Healthy Leader podcast](#) and is the author of a number of bestselling books, including *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*, and the devotional, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day*. Pete and Geri also developed the two-part [Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course](#), a ground-breaking course used by thousands of churches in North America and around the world. Pete's books and resources have been translated into over twenty-five different languages.

