

This book offers a wonderfully practical look at how people move from a relationship in which God is unknown to one in which he is fully known. Through life experiences, ministry testimonies, and biblical engagement, Dr. Luchetti encourages you to go deep spiritually along with those around you. Dr. Luchetti provides a framework for discipleship that is memorable and transferrable—a helpful guide for pastors and ministry leaders.

—COLLEEN DERR, associate professor, Congregational Spiritual Formation and Christian Ministries, Wesley Seminary

True Depth is a vital book for this day. This book has depth but is understandable and moves beyond Western “churchanity” to biblical Christianity. I believe the use of this book will be a catalyst in any congregation to new depths and transformation of churches and communities throughout the nation.

—JO ANNE LYON, General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church

This book will both encourage your heart and challenge your thinking. It inspires and instructs toward three huge ideas: God is the primary maker of deep disciples; the church, though flawed, is the beautiful environment God designed to support disciple-making; and Christians can live a more vibrant and deeper life in Christ! *True Depth* is theological and practical, filled with honest stories that will grab your heart. If you’d like to see discipleship become more spiritually organic and less culturally organized, this book is for you.

—DAN REILAND, executive pastor of 12Stone Church

This book powerfully unfolds how God develops deep disciples in Christian community.

—WAYNE SCHMIDT, vice president of Wesley Seminary

With clear language, Lenny Luchetti unpacks what’s involved in growing into maturity in the faith. As with most things of substance, there’s more going on than initially meets the eye. *True Depth* helps us see what we’d otherwise miss.

—MARSHALL SHELLEY, editor of *Leadership Journal*

Revelation. Restoration. Transformation. Sanctification. Mission. With these five words, Lenny Luchetti gives us not only a biblical vision, but a theological mission with a practical outline. *True Depth* is a tour de force into the Wesleyan way of “practical divinity.”

—J. D. WALT, Seedbed’s sower-in-chief

This book is filled with the same forward-thinking spirit that defines its author. Lenny Luchetti’s challenge is classically timeless, but everything about the way he writes and thinks feels fresh. For those who are jaded by the church or have become cynical about the lack of true disciples in our time, *True Depth* presents a hopeful way forward.

—DARREN WHITEHEAD, pastor and author of *Rumors of God*

This is not another trendy book on discipleship, but a genuine, clear approach with practical exercises that will help church attendees dive deeply into Christlike living. First it will change you, and then it will change your church.

—BOB WHITESEL, award-winning author of *The Healthy Church* and *Cure for the Common Church*

TRUE DEPTH

MOVING BEYOND CULTURAL CHURCHIANITY

Lenny Luchetti

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INTRODUCTION

SWIMMING IN THE DEEP END

The sixth year of Sam's life was defining. His fear of taking a risk kept him from venturing into the deep end of our community pool. As a dad, I wanted him to be generally averse to risk. But this was different. He was a good swimmer, completely capable of thriving in water over his head. I tried to coax him into the deep end numerous times. "Come on, Sam, you can do it!" I even resorted to bribery: "If you jump into the deep end, I will take you out for ice cream, let you watch your favorite movie, and allow you to stay up late tonight." He didn't budge. I whispered threats: "Sam, if you don't jump into the deep end of the pool right now, no ice cream, no movie, and no staying up late." Clearly, this is not a book on how to parent.

My bribes and threats didn't inspire Sam to do what I knew he could do. He'd had swimming lessons and lots of practice. He was physically ready to launch out of the shallow end of the pool into the depths with his older brother and sister. But was he ready internally? In order to go boldly where he had not gone before, Sam had to become discontent with shallow-water walking and be willing to overcome his fear of deep-water swimming.

One day it happened. Sam became so bored in the shallows that he was willing to risk a jump into the six-foot abyss. When he did, the joy on his face and in his voice was priceless. "Daddy, I'm swimming in the deep end! Look at me, Daddy. I knew I could do it. Are you proud of me, Daddy? Can I have ice cream? Can I watch a movie? Can I stay up late? Please, Daddy? You said I could."

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"Absolutely, Sam!" My son seemed to grow a foot taller that day. His willingness to forsake status quo and take a risk matured him.

God is calling his kids out of the boredom of shallow discipleship and into the adventure of deep discipleship. We don't need to rely on

a floatation device. Our heavenly Father has taught us how to swim. We were made for the depths of a discipleship journey worth living and dying for.

YOUR SWIM COACH

Christians are bored with the trite and trendy. The church needs another trendy discipleship book as much as it needs more announcements during the Sunday worship service. We don't want another book that takes the reader's soul on a long bus ride only to drop it off exactly where it was picked up. Too many discipleship resources focus on what *we* can do to make disciples. This book emphasizes what *God* does to make disciples through the local church.

Disciples are starving for the significance and stretching that comes with a radical and risky relationship with Christ. We hunger for substance not safety and status quo. I offer *True Depth* as a faithful response to the hunger pains of twenty-first-century Christians.

Here are a few noteworthy features of this book:

- Reflection questions to guide individuals and groups in exploring the dynamics of deep discipleship.
- Practical exercises that are congruent with the life Christ lived and calls us to embrace.
- Testimonial excerpts from disciples like you who are seeking to swim in the depths.

Deep disciples are not self-made but God-made. They are formed by revelation (what God does *among* us), restoration (what God does *for* us), transformation (what God does *to* us), sanctification (what God does *in* us), and mission (what God does *through* us). These five discipleship dynamics provide a paradigm for true depth, and they form the core chapters of this book. The sequencing of the chapters does not suggest a step-by-step progression. For deep-end disciples, these five dynamics happen always and everywhere, simultaneously and continuously.

Too many Christians are experiencing a bland brand of discipleship that feels more burdensome than liberating. *True Depth* is written for Christians who want to experience an authentic and adventurous discipleship swim. This book is also written for pastors and small-group leaders who want to help people grow in Christ so they can swim in the deep end. The discipleship dynamics presented here are accessible and adaptable to a broad range of Christians and denominations.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

God, if you are with us, nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, nothing else matters. Be with us. We submit ourselves to your revelation, restoration, transformation, sanctification, and mission. Do something among, for, to, in, and through us. We pray these things only and always for your glory and for the good of the world you created, sustain, and love. Amen!

**CULTURAL
CHURCHIANITY
VERSUS BIBLICAL
CHRISTIANITY**

1

Swimming in the shallows has caused the church to sink. It's easy to find statistics, polls, and trends that expose current discipleship challenges. God has called disciples out of darkness and into light, out of the world and into Christ. Yet differences between Christians and non-Christians are difficult to detect. The divorce rates, addiction patterns, spending habits, and leisure activities for those inside the church are surprisingly similar to those outside the church. Evidently, Christians are not making much of a splash in the shallows.

Part of the problem is that people have been immunized against biblical Christianity. Certain high-profile preachers and the electronic and print media that propagate their messages are the primary culprits. These teachers lead people to believe that following Christ cultivates a cozy, comfortable, and convenient sort of life. The susceptible masses assume that, in Christ, every day is a Friday. But more often the actual discipleship journey feels like a Monday. A cozy inner tube is not available when swimming in the depths with Christ. There's only a cross with a cost.

The American dream has hijacked Christian discipleship. Simply put, the gospel of health, wealth, and happiness has produced a church, primarily in North America, in which disciples are just treading shallow water. That's the bad news. The good news is that many of these disciples are starving, nearly to spiritual death, for something more significant.

The Christian gospel includes both connection and confrontation. The challenge is in trying to discern which core elements of the gospel connect to the culture and which ones confront the culture. In too many instances, the church's historic and current attempts to

connect the gospel to culture compromised and even contradicted the gospel. Like oil and water, peanut butter and Italian dressing, and an orange shirt and red pants, some things just don't blend. Cultural "churchianity," built on personal preferences, narcissistic consumerism, rugged individualism, and safe status quo, absolutely cannot mix with biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity involves cross bearing, self-denial, and costly sacrificial love.

A "churchian," not to be mistaken for a Christian, swims in the shallows. A churchian attends church gatherings, serves others, and seems moral. He is a good person. He practices spiritual disciplines but usually only when he wants something from God. He tries to be generous. He looks a lot like a true disciple.

However, *he* is the center of his religion. He keeps Christ at arm's length. He follows what he perceives to be God's will as long as it aligns with his conception of "the good life."

*I assumed the safe answer
was the right answer. Jesus
never called us to be safe!*

—Michelle

As soon as Christ makes demands, as he often does, problems arise. The churchian ignores any call to deny self and pick up the cross. The cross and cost do not figure into his religion of comfort and convenience.

Although we cannot assume that people become deep disciples simply because they attend church, disciples are not made without the church. Disciples will never learn to swim in the depths without the help of a local church community. God is the one who makes disciples, but he does so through the church. Disciples of depth cannot be made outside of the context of Christian community.

A HAUNTING QUESTION

Some questions challenge and, at times, haunt every generation of Christians. One of the big questions standing nose to nose with the church today is, “Are disciples actually being made?” I heard Jim Herrington, a former Southern Baptist pastor who resides in Houston, Texas, wrestle with this question. I visited Houston as part of my doctoral studies to explore the many different sizes and styles of churches that exist in that city. I visited black, white, and multi-ethnic churches that were large, mid-size, and small. They ranged from traditional, contemporary, and emergent in urban, rural, or suburban settings. What stood out to me most from that field trip was Jim’s question. It haunted me.

“Are disciples really being made?” Jim asked. He had resigned as pastor of a megachurch because he believed too much distance had come between him and the people he was called to disciple. He admitted being too busy programming the church to find time to disciple the people. So Jim purchased a home in Montrose, a red-light district of Houston. He opened his home to runaways, prostitutes, addicts, alcoholics, transvestites, and whoever was homeless and hungry for hope. Jim welcomed this assorted crew and finally felt he was close enough to people to partner with God in making disciples. As far as I could tell from the stories he told, God was transforming lives. People on the fringe were not only coming to faith in Christ, but also learning to swim in the deep end of the discipleship pool.

It is possible for any church to make disciples. An unfair assumption is that large churches don’t make disciples, while small churches do. The fact is some megachurches hit the ball out of the park when

it comes to forming biblical Christians. I also know of small churches that are better at forming cultural churchians than they are at making disciples. A church's size does not matter.

During that trip to Houston, I met another pastor who had resigned from traditional local church ministry. He had purchased a bar as an outreach to people far from God. I met with him to learn from his strategy for evangelism and discipleship. His evangelistic plan was simple. He hosted Friday night poker at the bar. Texas hold 'em, no doubt.

He seemed to have a strong intent to reach out and build bridges to people. "But what are you doing to disciple the people God brings your way?" I inquired. His discipleship plan was even simpler. It was nonexistent, really. "I don't have a plan for that," he admitted unapologetically. I wonder how many local churches have, figuratively speaking, purchased a bar to reach people without a plan to grow them.

I, too, was guilty of putting most, if not all, of my eggs in the outreach basket. Somehow I had forgotten that the best way to evangelize sinners is to disciple saints. When disciples of true depth embody the Christ-life among family members, friends, and coworkers, the evangelistic sparks fly. I knew this fact, but somehow I had managed to ignore it consistently.

The congregation I most recently served as pastor had a solid plan for reaching people who were disconnected from intimate relationship with God. This is partly why the congregation nearly tripled in size in six years. Hundreds of people crossed the line of faith in Christ, and many of them were baptized. Baptism formed the backbone of our discipleship process. In fact, it was pretty much

the extent of our discipleship plan. Sure, we invited people to grow through small groups and service opportunities, but in a soft-sell kind of way. We didn't want to scare away the new people who were coming into the life of our church. This was a bad strategy.

I thought we were doing great. We weren't. My failure to initiate a biblical and intentional discipleship plan allowed new Christians to swim in the shallow end of the pool for far too long. Like my son Sam, many of these new disciples were completely capable of swimming in the deep end, but I didn't encourage or teach them how. I was better at making churchians than Christians. According to national statistics and expert analysis, our congregation was more the norm than the exception. How, then, do we move out of the shallows and into the depths where we are in over our heads, caught up in the discipleship adventure of a lifetime?

ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

In a faraway place, long, long ago, a group of people began to follow Jesus. His life and teaching captivated them. He drew them into discipleship, a journey of learning, praying, growing, going, giving, and serving. Into their lives flowed meaning, forgiveness, joy, purpose, peace, and love like they had never known. But unexpected ridicule, persecution, and pain also flooded their lives. Some of these disciples began to stall. They began to wonder if following Jesus was worth the cost. If they continued to stay on the discipleship journey, they would end up in water over their heads. These first-century followers floated in the middle of the pool trying to

decide whether to choose the safe shallows or the risky depths. They realized there was no discount on the cost of discipleship.

Mark wrote his gospel to encourage these indecisive disciples to reach forward and kick toward the deep end. Rome's intense persecution of Christians in the first century made venturing into true depth extremely costly. It was tempting for disciples to choose the shallows. They could easily dog paddle toward them by compromising Christian convictions and accepting some of the pagan practices of Rome. Some did.

Mark's gospel inspired some deliberating disciples to swim from inch-deep dedication to mile-deep devotion. How did Mark do this? He concluded that the best way was to show them Jesus. The punch line of Mark's gospel is, "If you want to know what discipleship looks like, focus on Jesus, not the disciples." All four gospels highlight how clueless those first followers were, but Mark's gospel is especially brutal in its depiction of Peter, James, John, and the rest of the crew.

Mark offers a daring and life-altering vision of discipleship. Disciples in the twenty-first century need this message at least as much as, and maybe even more than, those in first-century Rome, who were struggling to swim. Many of us have discovered that while following Jesus certainly has its perks, the cost makes the superficial shallow end look more attractive than it is. The stakes are high, and the sacrifices are significant in the deep end. Mark refused to

Cultural churchianity framed my view of Christianity in my early years. If my discipleship journey did not look like what churchianity dictated, I thought I was doing something wrong. In short, cultural churchianity limited my freedom in Christ. How sad. This trend not only stifled me, but it also grieved the Father.

—Laura

diminish the cost of the cross for Christ-followers. His gospel, then, serves as an insightful basis for the discipleship dynamics presented in this book.

TIME TO LAUNCH

Be warned. As you read on, you will encounter questions designed to have a hauntingly holy influence upon you: Is my life marked more by cultural churchianity than biblical Christianity? Do I love God better as I grow older? Am I playing life safe in the shallows or venturing out deeper into the discipleship pool? Do I resist the urge to build my kingdom so that I can focus the best of my resources on building God's kingdom? Has my willingness to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus decreased or increased over time? Is my relationship with Christ stagnant or growing? Am I really a disciple?

Swimming in the shallows will cause the church to sink. It's time for followers of Christ to launch out into the depths. God is not looking for churchians, but for Christians. The Holy Spirit, through the local church, equips and empowers us to swim in the deep end of the discipleship pool. God gives us arms to reach and legs to kick so that we can not merely survive, but thrive in the depths. When we dare to launch out to where "deep calls to deep" (Ps. 42:7), we find the faithful, fruitful, and fulfilling waters for which we thirst. Are you ready for true depth?

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God makes disciples through the church, when they swim away from the shallows of cultural churchianity and toward the depths of biblical Christianity.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

What do you think are the differences between cultural churchianity and biblical Christianity?

How does your life and local church reflect the values of either shallow churchianity or deep Christianity?

Where are you swimming in the discipleship pool? Are you in the shallows, in the deep, or in the middle and deciding where to swim? Where would those who know you best plot your location in the discipleship pool?

What decisions will you make today in order to launch deeper into the discipleship pool?

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord, forgive us for swimming at times in the safe shallow pool, barely making a splash in our commitment to you. Thank you for empowering us with the spiritual arms and legs we need to thrive in the deep end with Christ. Give us the audacity to do whatever it takes to launch into the depths of discipleship. Amen.