

stuff you wish they taught in seminary

A photograph showing a hand raised in prayer, silhouetted against a blurred background of people and lights. The background has a bokeh effect with colors of purple, blue, and white. The text is overlaid on the bottom portion of the image.

It's Not Deep Enough:
Responding to Discipleship
Critics in Your Church

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If you're a church leader, chances are you've heard some form of criticism that sounds something like this:

- "It's not deep enough."
- "I wish we would go deeper."
- "I wish our church was more gospel-centered."

I feel like these criticisms are as old as our faith. In fact, after talking with church leaders across the country, it appears they hear some version of this common comment all the time. This commentary isn't limited to one particular style or theological persuasion of church; it's heard throughout various corners of the Christian world. From the happy-clappy to the frozen chosen, from the Bible-centered to community-responsive models, it always seems like there is a segment of Christ followers that are happy to provoke their leaders by complaining that the church just isn't "deep enough."

How do you respond to such criticism?

For many leaders, it can feel like a dagger to their very souls. None of us got into ministry because we wanted to have a shallow faith. None of us are sacrificing the things we do just so we can scratch people's ears or simply present some sort of watered-down version of the Gospel.

Church leaders try to establish a faithful representation of the biblical community they see in the New Testament within their own

communities today. The heartbeat of church leaders is to apply the timeless teachings of Christ to the life we experience today. We're looking for ways to apply the ancient scriptures so that people can live out that faith in a robust and generous manner during their day to day lives.

Practically speaking, how do you react and respond to this question when you're confronted with it? Like every question that's asked of you as a leader, it's good to dig below the surface and understand the real reasons behind the question before responding.

Let's consider how you can respond to discipleship critics at your church. Here are some ways to think about how to encourage people to understand your mission more deeply and to engage with the community you're attempting to connect with.

Faith in action

The New Testament leans towards the fact that our faith in Christ is not primarily something between our ears but rather something to live out in the world around us. Sometimes when people are criticizing the church for not being "deep enough," what they're actually looking for is more trivia acquisition. They're looking for more Bible facts and figures so they can impress other Christians at cocktail parties (but let's be honest, this crowd doesn't go to cocktail parties).

However, that motivation is starkly contrasted to even just a plain reading of the New Testament. Time and again, people ask, "How are we living out our faith? How are we taking what we know about Jesus and putting that into action?" It doesn't appear that true faith, from a New Testament perspective, is just about information acquisition or a simple verbal or mental assent to a series of timeless truths.

It's legitimate to push back when someone comments that the church is not deep enough and ask them to explain what a deeper faith looks like. From what I can tell, it would appear that a deep faith is one that attempts to live out the message of Jesus in a relevant manner in the communities around us.



- "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done." – Proverbs 19:17
- "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." – Luke 4:18-19
- "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along." – Galatians 2:10
- "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." – James 1:22
- "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." – James 1:27
- "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" – James 2:1-4

- "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." – James 2:15-17
- "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" – Matthew 25:40
- "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." – 1 John 3:18

"There's another church across town."

You've got to watch how you say this one, because you don't want to come across as aloof or emotionally disconnected from someone when they're asking you a legitimate question. However, it is true that your church isn't going to be the right fit for everyone in your town.

We need lots of different approaches in order to reach different kinds of people. It's perfectly acceptable to point to another four or five churches within a 20-minute drive of your church that you could refer people to when they come to you with this kind of complaint.

A great way to do this is to ask them to complete this sentence: "I like our church; however, I wish it was more ____." That would be the time to help someone understand there may be other churches in town that are more in line with what they're looking for.

For example, someone might complain that your church doesn't "do more worship."

After you process that idea with them and realize that you don't seem to be coming to a meeting of the minds, you could say, "If you're looking for a church with more musical worship, you really should check out **this other church across town**. I know the pastor there, and they have great people at Across Town Church. They love the Lord, and you know what? I happen to know that they do 45 minutes of musical worship every Sunday. You should check them out."

People might say, "I really love our church, but I wish it was more **focused on expositional teaching**." And you could say, "Well, I'm glad you mentioned that. My friend Pastor Susan across town in the middle of a 24 week series on the book of Luke. It's fantastic, I really think the world of them. You should check them out. Would you like me to make that connection for you?" By being disarmingly open with your people, you both clarify why it is you do what you do and show that there really is no competition in the body of Christ. It's so important to realize that at the end of the day we all want people to get more connected and deeply rooted in their churches.

Challenge into leadership

When someone comes to you and says that the church simply isn't deep enough, you might consider engaging this person in a conversation about leadership.

Sometimes this concern stems from a very genuine place about the discipleship makeup of a church. In fact, this might be the opportunity to help this person become more connected to the community by becoming a leader in the church. Sometimes people raising their hands like this are the ones you want to get more plugged in!



Rather than deferring them or challenging them about whether they're putting their faith into action, you could simply acknowledge that yes, we are looking for ways to continue to grow the discipleship culture. Ask them to explain how they would see that the discipleship culture grow, or how they would improve this aspect of your ministry. Maybe they'll offer to lead a small group, suggest the possibility of a Bible elective, or run a weekend preaching conference. Once they mention their ideas, it would be entirely appropriate to ask if they would be willing to help that idea come to fruition.

Reaching new people

This can be a perfect opportunity for us to talk through the mission of our church. The church I attend has regular conversations about how we're trying to be the kind of church that unchurched people love to attend. For us, that means that we do feel uniquely called to engage those who don't normally attend church.

Consider when Jesus was asked questions about faith. He often just responded with more questions rather than diving into long, theological diatribes. Following in that tradition, we are attempting to engage the broader public as they're asking questions about faith, about things that are relevant to the Bible, and about the teachings of Jesus.

I don't believe that there are church leaders who are attempting to water down the message of Jesus in order to reach people; rather, we are trying to hold to the timeless truths of Christ and engage the broader culture at the same time. And so, we are going to err on the side of engagement because we think that there's a bigger mission out there.

The local church is the only organization in the world whose primary focus should be on the people not yet within its walls. In the same way that Jesus sent us into all the world to share the good news, we feel a unique call to reach out to our community and ask, "Hey, how can we engage the people in our community with what it means to follow Christ?" Ask the person who questions the church's depth about how they're engaging with that mission and what you can do to help them become more deeply involved in seeing their community be impacted by the message of Christ.

This can be a good time to help people get clarity on the mission and to invite them to join in and be a part of it.

How do you respond to critics in your church? I suspect that most of the church leaders reading this have heard this criticism lodged against them at some point in time. What do you say when people say your church is not deep enough? I'd love to hear in the comments below about how you respond to this issue. What conversations have you had that have been helpful in ultimately turning a critic into a more engaged member of your church? **I'm cheering for you as you tackle those hard conversations, and I'm honored that I get to serve alongside you as you attempt to reach the people that God has put in your path.**

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