



**BACKWARD  
DISCIPLESHIP**

**RON HUNTER JR.**

BACK

**BACKWARD  
DISCIPLESHIP**

WARD

**D6** FAMILY MINISTRY  
114 BUSH RD - NASHVILLE, TN 37217 - 800.877.7030 - D6FAMILY.COM

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

©2026 Ron Hunter Jr.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other means—except for brief quotation in critical reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by D6 Family Ministry

114 Bush Road

Nashville, TN 37217

d6family.com

ISBN: 9781614842125

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.\* Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), Text Edition: 2016, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bible, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked CSB are from The Christian Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

## Key Leaders Are Saying This About **BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP**

Ron Hunter masterfully diagnoses the discipleship epidemic facing the church today—and offers a transformative solution: backward planning that starts with the end in mind. Instead of scrambling to address each crisis as it emerges, *Backward Discipleship* equips churches, families, and individuals to think strategically and sequentially about spiritual formation, building intentional pathways from preschool through adulthood. Every pastor, parent, and ministry leader serious about raising resilient disciples who endure and multiply should read this book and implement its proven generational strategies.

—Robby Gallaty, pastor, Long Hollow Church,  
author of *Growing Up* and *Movement Ready Church*

*Backward Discipleship* combines biblical wisdom, rich research, and compelling metaphors to challenge leaders to begin with the end in mind in discipling the next generation. The data and research woven throughout the book is accessible, applicable, and engaging. Ron Hunter reminds us that faith formation begins at birth, with each age and stage playing a critical role in discipling the next generation to have a faith marked by spiritual maturity and resilience.

—Shelly Melia, Ph.D., associate dean in the Graduate School of Ministry at Dallas Baptist University, contributing author in *Reimagining Church as Family* and *Children and Salvation: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Considerations*

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

This book is written from the perspective of a practitioner, not merely a consultant. Rather than reacting to obstacles day by day with no clear plan, Ron emphasizes the importance of working backward from a desired outcome to the present. Intentional, strategic, relational discipleship—where churches and parents partner together—is the answer. It isn't easy, but it is right. I truly believe you will find this book convicting, motivating, and deeply practical.

—Jim Putman, senior pastor of Real Life Ministries and author of *Disciple Shift*, *The Disciple's Journey*, *Real-Life Discipleship*, and *Hope for the Prodigal*

It turns out “begin with the end in mind” isn't just a good business principle, it's a key discipleship principle. Ron Hunter uses his extensive knowledge and experience in family faith formation to give parents, pastors, and church volunteers a plan forward—by working backward.

—Arlene Pellicane, author of *Parents Rising* and host of the *Happy Home Podcast*

In *Backward Discipleship*, Ron Hunter makes a solid case for the need to “reverse engineer” how we think about, and engage in, effective discipleship. He engages these topics from solid academic, theological, leadership, and biblical frameworks while showing us how we can become seasoned practitioners! As a professor and pastor, *Backward Discipleship* will be incorporated into my ministry leadership courses and church teaching.

—Rich Griffith, D.Min., professor of youth and family ministry, ministry leadership, University of Toccoa Falls. Author of *Voices: Helping Our Children and Youth Listen to Wise Counsel*, *Discipleship Is Leadership*, and co-editor and author of *Reimagining Church as Family*.

*Backward Discipleship* addresses the tension between Sunday faith and Monday life, between good intentions and lasting formation. This book helped me slow down and ask better questions—not just about church strategy, but about legacy. Ron doesn't offer quick fixes or clever programs. He offers something far better—a biblical framework for forming resilient disciples who endure.

—Jonathan Williams, Ph.D., director of Gospel Family Ministries, lead pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church, affiliate professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and managing editor of the *Southwestern D6 Family Ministry Journal*, author of *A Practical Theology of Family Worship and Gospel Family*

*Backward Discipleship* is a wake-up call the church desperately needs. My friend, Ron Hunter Jr., challenges us to stop reacting to faith loss and start preparing disciples who will endure. This book is biblically grounded, research-informed, and intensely practical. If you care about the next generation following Jesus, you need to read this and put it into practice.

—Shane Pruitt, national next gen director, North American Mission Board (NAMB), author of *Reaching Generation Alpha*

## **BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP**

---

## CONTENTS

### **Part 1: Facing the Discipleship Deficit**

Why We Must Rethink How Discipleship Works .....	15
1. Begin With the End in Mind .....	17
2. The Faith Drop-Off: Where We're Losing Them.....	31
3. Why Some Faith Sticks: The Research Behind Spiritual Resilience.....	51

### **Part 2: Redefining Discipleship for a Generational Impact**

Biblical Foundations and Practical Frameworks.....	77
4. What Discipleship Really Is (and Isn't).....	79
5. Family Ministry Beyond Biology.....	101
6. Four Generational Discipleship Models That Work ....	121
7. Where Church and Home Meet .....	149

### **Part 3: Turning Strategy Into Action**

How Churches Lead the Change Toward Generational Discipleship.....	173
8. Starting the Generational Discipleship Shift .....	175
9. Teaching for Transformation: Worldviews That Shape Values .....	191
10. Why Curriculum Is Not a Silver Bullet .....	207
11. Metrics That Matter .....	227
12. Discipleship Staffing: Hiring, Coaching, and Releasing Well.....	239

**Part 4: Moving Forward With a Backward Strategy**

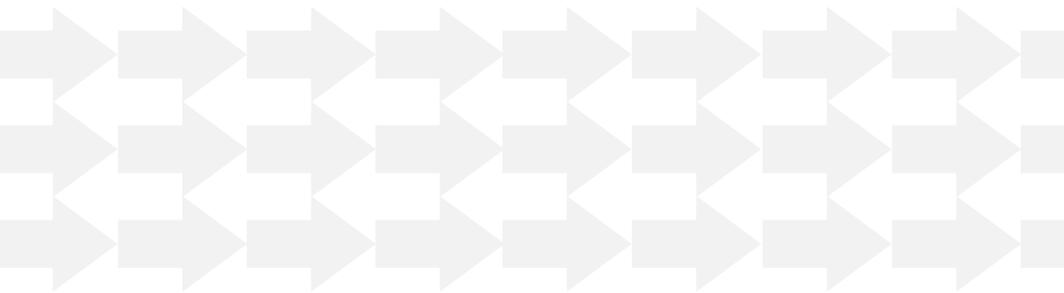
Staying Faithful in a Forward-Moving World..... 255

13. Leadership and Discipleship: Two Sides of the  
Same Coin ..... 257

14. The Backward Church in a Forward World..... 281

**Appendices: Tools for Implementation**

- Appendix A: Generational Ministry Job Descriptions ...289
- Appendix B: Curriculum Evaluation Checklist.....297
- Appendix C: Defining Discipleship:  
Definitions From the Book, in Order of Appearance ... 300
- Appendix D: The Faith-Forging Five Discipleship  
Assessment .....307



# Introduction

## Thinking Backward to Move Forward

Scripture is filled with backward plans. Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh's court and forty more as a shepherd before he was ready to lead Israel. Jonah endured three days in the belly of a whale before he could preach in Nineveh. Daniel's parents shaped his convictions long before Babylon tested them. Jesus surrendered in Gethsemane before He was sacrificed at Calvary.

Before every major moment in Scripture, there was preparation. Nothing of eternal weight ever happened by accident. God always began with the end in mind.

Even the long genealogies we skim or skip reveal intentionality. Whether you read from Adam to Jesus or from Jesus back to Adam, they show God's plan unfolding. The moment humanity sinned, God had already envisioned a substitute sacrifice in His Son. Every story pointed toward Calvary. And now, every chapter in our lives points toward how we influence the next generation of disciples.

A backward plan is what God calls discipleship. It is the intentional inclusion of moments, mentors, and Scripture that prepare us for what lies ahead. Discipleship never happens by chance. It is the steady shaping of a life so when storms come, faith stands firm.

If the title caught you off guard, let me explain. Backward discipleship begins with the end in view and maps every step with purpose, shaping believers who endure in faith and multiply as generational disciples who raise up generational disciplemakers. Think, reverse engineering but for discipleship.

Backward discipleship is countercultural, yet it is the way of Christ. Throughout these pages, you will discover why faith often fades, how generational strategies endure, and what leaders, parents, and mentors can do to prepare disciples for a lifetime of following Jesus. The chapters build intentionally: starting with the end in mind, naming where we are losing ground, learning why some faith sticks, understanding discipleship models, and then equipping leaders and families with practical tools. Chapter by chapter, you will see how every backward step prepares the way for forward faithfulness.

### **Why Thinking Backward Matters**

We live in a world obsessed with speed, convenience, and instant gratification. We measure progress in likes, clicks, and quick wins. But discipleship does not thrive on speed. It thrives on depth, on roots planted long before storms arrive.

Think of how God has worked through history. He always planned backward for forward impact. Redemption was not improvised in the moment; it was woven into creation's story from the beginning. Jesus Himself followed a backward plan—thirty years of hidden preparation before three years of visible ministry. If God is that intentional, how can we think faith will endure if we leave discipleship to chance?

The temptation for churches is to focus only on what works today: fill the calendar, meet attendance goals, create engaging programs. But if today's energy does not prepare believers for tomorrow's trials, we may be celebrating while losing ground. Backward

discipleship calls us to pause, identify where we are, and map a path to where we must go.

## **What This Book Will Do**

This book will challenge the way you understand discipleship by moving you from quick fixes to generational strategies. It will call you to resist the urgency of a forward-driven world and embrace the intentionality of a backward plan. Through biblical insight, current research, and practical models, you will see why some faith fades and why other faith endures. More than theory, this book offers a framework for leaders, parents, and churches to cultivate resilient disciples who last and multiply across generations.

In short, this book argues that lasting discipleship requires backward planning by starting with the end in mind, guided by Scripture, informed by research, and lived out in generational community so faith endures and multiplies across generations. As you read *Backward Discipleship*, notice how the four parts of the book coaches you toward intentional, lasting discipleship.

### **Part 1: Facing the Discipleship Deficit**

- **Chapters 1–3** explain why backward planning is essential for discipleship, identify the faith drop-off and where the next generation is being lost, and explore why some faith endures, drawing on research and stories of resilient believers.

### **Part 2: Redefining Discipleship for a Generational Impact**

- **Chapters 4–7** examine definitions of discipleship, acknowledge brokenness in families while calling for mentors within the church to function as spiritual family, unpack four generational discipleship models that help churches think strategically, and show how church and home live out biblical discipleship together.

### Part 3: Turning Strategy Into Action

- **Chapters 8–12** coach leaders on how to lead change, explore ways worldviews are formed and how to be intentional in shaping them, describe the role curriculum plays in developing disciples, and challenge churches to shift toward measuring what truly matters in discipleship.

### Part 4: Moving Forward With a Backward Strategy

- **Chapters 13–14** explore different approaches to leadership and inspire churches and homes to live out the full backward discipleship journey.

Each chapter builds intentionally on the last. The journey cannot be random. It must be a backward plan for forward momentum.

Most people first notice the arrows pointing forward on the cover, symbolizing what we all long for: children whose faith endures, adults who walk with Christ daily, and generations continuing the journey together. Those who look closer, who dig deeper, also see the arrows pointing left or backward. They look back, not with nostalgia but with awareness, reminding us of where we are and of the intervals between here and there. Those backward arrows tell a story of formation, of faith forged in preparatory moments through mentors who invest deeply, conversations that shape conviction, mission experiences that stretch compassion, and rhythms of worship that steady the soul. Together, the arrows capture the heart of *Backward Discipleship*, moving forward by looking backward, remembering where faith was formed so we can guide the next generation toward where it must go.

This book invites you to see what is obvious and what lies beneath, to look closer and dig deeper, until moving forward by planning backward becomes one movement of faith anchored in Christ, forged through discipleship, and guided by principles rather than trends.

## **An Invitation**

My prayer is that this book will stir your imagination, challenge your assumptions, and strengthen your leadership. With your key leaders, you will be able to take these concepts and craft a backward plan that declares with confidence: if families come to our church and children grow up here, they will be shaped by Scripture, guided by mentors, and anchored in the practices proven to build lasting faith. Discipleship is not a program to run but a path to walk. It is not a quick fix but a generational strategy. Are you willing to think long-term and lead your people to capture a God-sized backward plan?

The truth is sobering: faith practiced only on Sundays rarely endures. But when faith is modeled at home, reinforced by mentors, rooted in daily rhythms of Scripture, and carried into honest conversations, it lasts. When churches stop chasing trends and start planning backward, disciples are made who endure, who multiply, and who shape the future. When disciples understand that formation reaches far beyond routine Bible study and grows through unselfish service in the church and in everyday life, their faith gains depth and direction.

The goal of this book is not about making discipleship easier, but about helping you see discipleship as intentional. Discipleship cannot just be a trendy label without being taught as a lifestyle. If you are ready to stop reacting and start preparing, then turn the page. Let's begin to think backward—so generations can move forward in Christ.

## **BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP**

---



BACK

PART 1

# **Facing Discipleship Deficit**

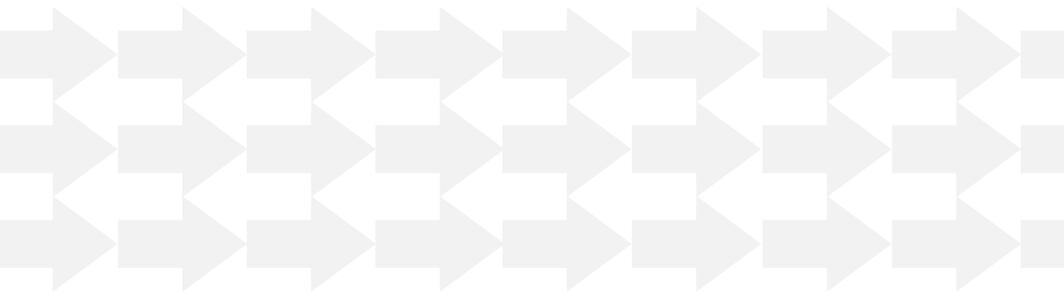
Why We Must Rethink  
How Discipleship Works

WARD



## **BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP**

---



## CHAPTER 1

# Begin With the End in Mind

### **When Foresight Fails, Disaster Doesn't**

If the builders of that grand ocean liner could have glimpsed just one scene from the future—the frantic chaos of April 14, 1912—they would've made different choices. A few more lifeboats. A few more questions asked. A few more “what ifs” explored. The tragedy of the Titanic wasn't just an engineering failure; it was a failure of anticipation.

Many ships have encountered and even hit icebergs, but the Titanic is famous because it failed to prepare for the eventual strike, thinking it was impervious. You already know how the story ends: 2,228 souls aboard a vessel branded as “unsinkable,” slicing through the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Then, a sudden collision with an iceberg. Panic. Darkness. And only then, amid the chaos, did someone finally ask the unthinkable: “How many lifeboats do we have?”

What's astonishing isn't the iceberg. It's the fact that no one had looked far enough ahead to imagine a scenario where the unimaginable became real. No designer, captain, or crew member had asked the simple, backward-planning question: “If this ship begins to sink,

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

what should we already have in place?” That single missing question made all the difference.

The old saying still rings true: “No one plans to fail; they simply fail to plan.” And sometimes, they fail to plan backward.

An oversight so costly, it still echoes more than a century later, 1,496 lives lost, with only 712 surviving that frigid April night.<sup>1</sup> Rich or poor, first class or third, the outcome didn’t discriminate. What was missing wasn’t money or manpower. It was foresight.

Since then, the world has tried to learn its lesson. Cruise ships now carry life vests in every stateroom, lifeboats for every passenger (plus a few extras), and mandatory muster drills to prepare all aboard for the unthinkable. These modern safeguards are standard today because someone finally imagined the worst possible outcome and then planned backward from that tragic result with a new ending in mind.

Let’s do the math. Of the 2,228 souls on the Titanic, roughly two-thirds perished. That’s eerily close to Barna’s research showing that 64% of church-involved teens and young adults disengage from their faith as they enter adulthood.<sup>2</sup> New Christians, regardless of their age will face choppy seas. Our kids are not impervious to cultural icebergs that will try to rip at the hull of their faith.

Like the Titanic, our churches are gliding through familiar waters, unaware that an iceberg looms, one that could tear a generation from its spiritual moorings. If pastors, parents, and mentors could glimpse what lies ahead, backward planning would no longer be optional. We’d begin packing our children with spiritual life vests, placing them in community lifeboats, and practicing drills on how to handle doubt, pressure, temptation, or cultural confusion, before the crisis comes.

Because the problem isn’t that we’ve planned to fail, it’s that we’ve failed to plan backward.

This chapter is about the art and urgency of beginning with the end in mind. Whether you are launching a ministry initiative, raising a child, mentoring a teenager, or shaping a church's culture, the same principle applies. If you know where you're going, you can trace the path backward to where you are now.

Kids do it instinctively with plastic soldiers. Educators use it when building curricula. NASA used it when aiming for the moon. And as you'll soon see, so does the Bible.

Backward planning does not just sharpen leaders; it strengthens disciples.

Let's explore why.

## **Plastic Soldiers and Pre-Battle Precision**

In my first book, *Toy Box Leadership*, I wrote about this very principle instilled in every soldier's training. In one chapter, the reader examines the plastic world of Little Green Army Men. These tiny figures, frozen mid-battle with rifles, radios, or rocket launchers, offer a surprising insight into leadership.<sup>3</sup> The military calls it "backward planning," a strategic method where you start with the desired end goal and work your way backward, identifying each critical step in reverse order until you reach your current position. It ensures that every action taken is intentional and aligned with the mission's success. Nothing is left to chance. Think of it as reverse-engineering your way to victory.

Ask any child to dump out a bucket of these plastic soldiers and watch what happens? They don't jump straight into pretend warfare. First, they organize. Standing soldiers in the back, kneeling ones in front. Bazooka guys flanked by radio operators. A four-year-old may not yet read chapter books, but they intuitively grasp sequencing. Kids know if the battle is the end goal, how do I set up to get there?

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

Backward planning isn't advanced strategy, it's instinctual. The question is: Why do we abandon it when the stakes are higher? We intuitively plan backward for events, tasks, and trips, but why not do the same for discipleship or the spiritual formation of kids? Why do we deploy it in business and ignore it in church and parenting?

### **A Youth Event Without a Plan**

Let's imagine a student pastor announcing a Saturday service project for teens to serve in under-resourced areas of the city. It sounds inspiring, but without preparation, it collapses fast. If that leader wakes up Saturday morning unsure who is driving the vans, how many lunches are needed, what tools to bring, or where to send the teams, chaos will follow. If that happens more than once, the church will soon start searching for a new youth pastor. Details are not optional; they are foundational. Without planning backward from the goal of a safe, well-led, and meaningful event, we gamble with good intentions and end up with poor results. When we chase short-term wins, we sacrifice the deeper discipleship patterns that shape lasting faith. Wise leaders choose long-term formation over everyday performance.

And yet, the church does this kind of forward-stumbling all the time. We plan events, but not learning experiences. We create programs, but not disciples. We live in the immediacy and not the legacy. We often prioritize instant gratification over long-term transformation.

What if we applied the logic of backward planning to spiritual formation?

## **Even Toddlers Understand Backward Sequencing**

Not long ago, I asked my four-year-old granddaughter about bedtime. “What do you do before you go to sleep?” I prompted. She rattled off her steps like a pro: “Bathtime, then pajamas, brush my hair, read my Bible story, pray, turn off the light, and then I sleep.”

Notably, she didn’t say, “Sleep, then brush my hair.” She understood what event precedes others. Sequence matters. Even toddlers know you don’t put on clean pajamas before bathtime. There is an order. There is intention. There is a goal.

Yet in churches, we disciple with a “we’ll figure it out as we go” mindset. The problem? That rarely produces mature believers. It produces busy ones.

## **The Academic World Already Knows**

Education has long followed a backward design model. You learn to add before you multiply. Nouns before adjectives. Phonics before essays. Algebra only makes sense once you have laid a foundation of arithmetic. Why? Because you cannot teach step C before someone understands step A.

Yet we often attempt spiritual algebra in churches where people have not yet grasped the basic math of faith. I am a words person and not a numbers person. So, if I were on the path to being an engineer and algebra, trigonometry, and physics were thrown at me, I would not survive because I never mastered the foundational building blocks. The goal of churches should be to build foundational what, why, and how steps into the discipleship process from preschool to adulthood (which includes the sequential when).

### **Biblical Backward Planning**

The Bible may not use the phrase backward planning, but the principle of starting with the end in mind echoes throughout its pages. From the very beginning, God had the seventh day in mind when He started creating the first. Each day built upon the last with deliberate purpose. He didn't begin with humans; He started by forming land under their feet and providing food for their sustenance. Then He pointed them to the seventh day, a day set apart for worship. From the very beginning, God worked a backward plan, starting with day one but aiming for the moment His creation would pause and glorify Him.

Jesus echoed this divine foresight when He said, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2, ESV). He wasn't just thinking ahead. He was working backward from eternity toward our present reality. The psalmist paints a vivid picture: "You prepare a table before me" (Psalm 23:5, ESV). That's not just a metaphor; it's an image of God setting the scene, planning the setting, the menu, and reviewing the guest list long before we arrive. Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish foreshadowed Christ's three days in the tomb. Every step: Christ's birth, life, miracles, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, was part of a carefully orchestrated plan with the end in mind. From the Fall in Genesis 3, the Father was moving history toward Calvary and beyond, ultimately preparing to welcome His bride home.

Nature itself gives us a metaphor. We admire the fruit on the branch but forget the unseen root system that made it possible. Branches point us back to the vine, the trunk, and the roots that feed it all. Likewise, when Jesus said, "I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49, KJV), or "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4, CSB), He was not reacting in real-time. He was living with complete clarity about His mission, planning backward from the cross.

Consider Passover: in Egypt, throughout Israel's history, and even under Roman rule, the people knew the end of the week would

culminate in a lamb being sacrificed. That destination shaped every preceding moment. Likewise, the psalmist reminds us to hide God's Word in our hearts now because we will need it later. As with Daniel facing life in Babylon, pressure shows up when beliefs collide with a hostile or confusing culture. That's proactive preparation, training before the trial.

Psalm 127 calls children "arrows in the hand of a warrior." But arrows do not shoot themselves. Targets become the backward plan—each step practiced and refined to ensure accuracy. Warriors train for precision. In the military, soldiers perform "dry fire" drills—slow and steady trigger pulls practiced without live ammunition to build skill and focus. Missed targets rarely come from bad intentions; they come from distractions, poor aim, or rushing the shot. Parenting works the same way. We aim our children toward godly targets early in life, setting smaller goals that prepare them for greater ones. When we help them hit the mark today, they are better equipped to hit the vital ones tomorrow.

The apostle Paul carried this same theme forward, using metaphors of racing, building, and planting. Each image points to intentionality, a backward plan with the end in mind. Discipleship, as Paul described it, is not passive or impulsive; it moves in a deliberate direction. Even Paul's guidance to spouses and parents reflected this mindset, urging us to shape the present with eternity in view. Every letter Paul wrote moved from principle to practice. In Ephesians, for example, the book ends with the armor of God, but every chapter before it builds toward that moment. God loves us. Christ died for us. He has a plan for us. He calls for unity in the body of Christ, for healthy marriages and families, and for faith worth defending. Backward planning produces disciples who are faithful, bold, and compassionate in Christlikeness.

**Backward discipleship is not a new idea. It's just often overlooked, especially where it matters most.** In parenting. In leader-

ship. In faith formation. We get busy responding to today and forget to plan for tomorrow. But Scripture urges us to live, lead, and disciple with the end in mind. When we start with eternity, we begin making different decisions today. Planning in a sequential order is the power of backward discipleship.

### **A Misunderstood Rearview Mirror**

Some churches are proud of their past. They talk about “the good old days” with glowing nostalgia. But let me ask: If your best years are behind you, maybe past leadership only planned for one generation. Only when each generation values the story of the others can the respect and true worship occur to begin the growth needed.

Looking backward is not the same as planning backward. To practice backward planning, you look forward to the end goal and design the path toward the target. You are looking forward with backward sequential preparation. There’s a difference between reminiscing and strategizing. Memory looks behind. Vision starts at the finish line and reverse-engineers the present.

Brittney Dent reminds us that parents have only 260 Saturdays to spend with their kids once they enter the teenage years.<sup>4</sup> Apps now even help parents count them down, urging them to make the most of what remains. Parents read dozens of books to guide infants into toddlerhood and track developmental “leaps” until their children start walking and talking. But why does that intentional planning stop after the preschool years? Psalm 90:12 reminds us to number our days and recognize how limited they are. The need for forward vision does not end—it deepens. Parents must look ahead and plan backward rather than looking backward and regretting what could have been.

## **Leadership and Discipleship: Two Sides of the Same Coin**

Later in this book, we will dig deeper into how discipleship and leadership intertwine. But let's be clear: both require a goal. John Kotter, a leading voice on organizational change, describes an eight-step process for change or transformation. His final step? Anchor the change in the culture. But that final securing step does not happen unless you begin with step one: establish a sense of urgency.<sup>5</sup>

Lasting change, real change, doesn't happen without intentional sequencing. Neither does spiritual maturity. Discipleship is a process, not a moment in time. Think of discipleship as reverse engineering. Picture the kind of person you want someone to become, then plan and build backward from that. What conversations, mentors, and moments are needed to get there?

Most everyone is now understanding the priority of discipleship, especially knowing it reaches and teaches in its purpose. According to Lifeway Research only 52% of pastors are satisfied and have a plan for discipleship in their church, with only 8% being super satisfied, leaving half without any plan. The report went further to say that only 30% have a way to measure their discipleship's effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

## **Begin With the End**

The Titanic was bound for New York. Everyone hoped the loved ones who boarded the vessel in Europe would reach their desired destination. Lists were posted of the survivors in both Southampton, England, and New York. Family members gathered, celebrated, and mourned if their loved ones made it. Churches today have their own lists of graduating seniors. They can easily access the social media posts of young people from the last decade who have graduated to determine if their lifestyle reflects anything Christlike or if their faith appears to be shipwrecked.

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

Most parents whose sons or daughters have drifted from church, walked away from their faith, or settled into a neutral, unengaged posture want the church to change its strategies. But the real shift begins with leaders who plan backward for the next generation. Reducing the 64% of teens and young adults who, according to Barna research, leave the church<sup>7</sup> requires intentional preparation long before those choices are made. It starts with children's ministers who plan ahead for the teenage years and student pastors who see themselves as part of a larger, unified mission rather than operating in isolation. Every ministry leader, whether volunteer or staff, can plan backward to anticipate the icebergs in a student's path, and partner with parents and mentors to guide them safely into adulthood as faithful disciplemakers.

Backward discipleship applies to every age, not just children, and it follows a purposeful, linear journey that extends far beyond salvation. Discipleship does not begin at conversion; it begins before belief takes root and continues as Christ reshapes thoughts, actions, and attitudes over a lifetime. Backward discipleship plans forward by starting exactly where a person is today, whether that person is a child, teenager, adult, or senior adult who does not yet know Christ. The process helps people move toward faith, find Christ, and teaches them to guide others along the same path. Starting early with children strengthens the long-term outcome, but faithful discipleship must engage everyone, no matter their age or stage of life or spiritual starting point.

This book will walk you through the art and practice of backward discipleship. But it starts here: with a mindset shift. From random to strategic. From programmatic to intentional. From short-term success to long-term faith formation. You are not just running events. You are shaping lives. You cannot afford to do it backward, unless it's on purpose, because backward planning is not accidental.

## **CASE STUDY:**

When NASA prepared to send astronauts to the moon, they didn't start with, "Let's build a rocket." They envisioned humans standing on the moon and then asked, "What do we need to get them there, keep them alive, and bring them home?"

Every possible detail was reverse-engineered: oxygen, food, navigation, emergency systems, and even tools for unpredictable breakdowns. The mission wasn't just about arrival; it was about survival, success, and safe return. They planned backward from the end. Today, various space agencies are applying the same principle as they set their sights on Mars, already Milky Way deep into the backward planning for the day humanity steps onto the red planet.

Now imagine you are launching your 18-year-old into the world. Whether it's college, the military, or their first job, they are lifting off. What have you packed, not in their suitcase, but in their soul?

What spiritual systems are in place? What habits, truths, and anchors will they carry with them when the terrain gets tough?

Now go one layer deeper, what if that teen wasn't your child? What if you were their small-group teacher, youth leader, van driver, volunteer, or perhaps sat across from them in the auditorium? What did you add to their launch preparation?

In discipleship, backward planning isn't optional; it's essential. We do not wait until a teen is leaving home to talk about faith, identity, and purpose. We start in preschool. We build through children's ministry. We reinforce in student ministry. Every stage matters. Every truth builds on the previous. Every day counts!

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy declared, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things—not because they are easy, but because they are hard...because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept...one we intend to win."<sup>8</sup>

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

Your church's discipleship journey is no different. It's hard work. You are not just launching young people into life. You are launching them into kingdom work.

What are you doing now to help them launch and land where God wants them to be? What values are you building into the journey?

### Discussion Questions

1. What icebergs wreck the hull of young people's faith and take them out of church and sink their faith? What resources can you begin to equip them with to help them avoid or survive such encounters?
2. What is your "end goal" for the people you disciple? Describe what spiritual maturity looks like in concrete terms for someone in your care.
3. In your church or ministry, how are different age groups being prepared sequentially? Are the efforts of preschool, children's, and student ministries aligned?
4. Where have you experienced the cost of poor planning, either personally or in ministry? What could have been different if backward planning had been applied?
5. What is your current discipleship "baseline"? How might tracking your church's or family's growth over time encourage forward momentum?
6. Who helped "launch" your faith journey? What did they intentionally do that you can replicate in someone else's life?

## Endnotes

1. Encyclopedia Titanica, <https://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic-survivors/>.
2. David Kinnaman, "Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64%, But What About Those Who Stay?" Barna Group. (2019), <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/>.
3. Ron Hunter, *Toy Box Leadership: Leadership Lessons From Toys You Loved as a Child* (Harper Business, 2009).
4. Brittney Dent (n.d.) "My D6 Conference Experience" on the D6 Blog, <https://d6family.com/my-d6-conference-experience/>.
5. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard University Press, 2012).
6. Aaron Earls, Lifeway Research. "Discipleship Is a Priority Without a Plan for Many Churches," Aug. 21, 2025, <https://research.lifeway.com/2025/08/21/discipleship-is-a-priority-without-a-plan-for-many-churches/>.
7. Kinnaman, "Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64%."
8. John F. Kennedy, "We Choose to Go to the Moon," speech delivered at Rice University, Houston TX. (September 12, 1962).

## **BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP**

---

## Appendix B: Curriculum Evaluation Checklist

Criteria	Evaluation Questions	Yes/No/ Notes
<b>Theological Accuracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aligns with our church's doctrine and denominational distinctives?</li><li>• Safeguards against drift into questionable/unbiblical sources?</li><li>• Reflects biblical/theological teaching rather than trends?</li></ul>	
<b>Scope and Sequence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Defines scope (breadth/depth of content)?</li><li>• Defines sequence (logical, age-appropriate order)?</li><li>• Covers the whole counsel of God over time?</li><li>• Includes all major categories of Scripture?</li><li>• Prevents "study hopping" by sticking to a plan?</li><li>• Teaches "why" and not just "what" (apologetics)</li><li>• Causes learners to wrestle with and not just memorize material?</li></ul>	
<b>Teacher and Leader Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provides training notes, helps, and age-appropriate activities?</li><li>• Could a new/hesitant volunteer teach confidently with the guide?</li><li>• Coaches leaders to be disciplemakers, not just presenters?</li></ul>	

## BACKWARD DISCIPLESHIP

---

Criteria	Evaluation Questions	Yes/No/ Notes
<b>Parent/ Mentor Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gives parents/mentors tools to extend lessons at home?</li><li>• Encourages discipleship in the home/relationships?</li><li>• Aligns lessons across ages for intergenerational conversations?</li></ul>	
<b>Discipleship Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Emphasizes transformation over information?</li><li>• Trains disciples, not just delivers lessons?</li><li>• Provides application that challenges learners for everyday life?</li><li>• Shows the learner how Scripture is relevant and part of the story of history and humanity?</li></ul>	
<b>Engagement Beyond Sunday</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourages Bible reading, prayer, application during the week?</li><li>• Provides Bible engagement tools and conversations Monday through Saturday?</li><li>• Moves truth into the 167 hours beyond church?</li></ul>	

## How to Use This Checklist

- Before purchase: compare curriculum options against each item.
- During use: re-evaluate every 12–18 months to ensure alignment with your discipleship goals.
- With your team: discuss these questions in staff or volunteer meetings to build shared vision.
- Remember Purpose: Remind ministry leaders and teachers that even in the choice of curriculum, we do NOT operate in silos (one-eared Mickey Mouse), but keep the end in mind with the choice.

A church that chooses curriculum thoughtfully will find that while no curriculum is perfect, the right one can become an *unseen staff member*—multiplying your ministry and anchoring your people in God’s Word.

## **Appendix D: The Faith-Forging Five Discipleship Assessment**



Special thanks to Dr. Shelly Melia for consulting and collaborating on the Faith-Forging Five Discipleship Assessment.

***Backward Discipleship*** flips the way you think about spiritual growth by asking one essential question: *What if we started with the end in mind?* Studies show nearly two-thirds of teenagers and young adults walk away from their faith and church. What if we focused instead on the one-third who stay—and learned why? By working backward from what sustains lasting faith, we can reshape the future.

Drawing on seventeen major research projects from respected sources, Dr. Hunter identifies five recurring themes—the *Faith-Forging Five*—that move us from problems to proven solutions.

What would change if you knew exactly which practices help faith endure for decades? By the final chapter, you'll be equipped with timeless, research-driven practices that strengthen faith across generations: Bible engagement, faith at home, mentors who matter, sharing your faith, and volunteering at church.

This book blends fresh research with practical models and decades of teaching experience. *Backward Discipleship* doesn't just diagnose what's broken—it shows you how to build a culture of faith that multiplies through generations, families, leaders, and communities.



**Ron Hunter, Ph.D.**

His books focus on discipleship, family ministry, and leadership, shaping how churches think about faith across generations. He serves as CEO of D6 Family Ministry, publisher of the D6 Curriculum, and founder of D6 and the D6 Family Ministry Model. Dr. Hunter teaches graduate students in discipleship and leadership at Dallas Baptist University, Welch College, and Randall University. He enjoys iced coffee, writing, and mentoring college students, but his most cherished roles remain husband, father, and granddaddy.

**D6 FAMILY  
MINISTRY**  
D6FAMILY.COM

\$21.99 USD

RELIGION / Christian Ministry / Discipleship  
RELIGION / Christian Ministry / Leadership  
RELIGION / Christian Ministry / Pastoral Resources

