



The Trinity Pulpit



The Power of One Discipleship—One Faith **Matthew 28:16-20**

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As the nation's culture changes in diverse ways, one of the most significant shifts is the declining reputation of Christianity, especially among young Americans. A new study by The Barna Group, conducted among 16- to 29-year olds, shows that a new generation is more skeptical of and resistant to Christianity than were people of the same age just a decade ago.

The study of Christianity's slipping image is explored in a new book, entitled *unChristian*, by David Kinnaman, the president of The Barna Group. The study is a result of collaboration between Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons of the Fermi Project.

The study shows that 16- to 29-year olds exhibit a greater degree of criticism toward Christianity than did previous generations when they were at the same stage of life. In fact, in just a decade, many of the Barna measures of the Christian image have shifted substantially downward, fueled in part by a growing sense of disengagement and disillusionment among young people. For instance, a decade ago the vast majority of Americans outside the Christian faith, including young people, felt favorably toward Christianity's role in society. Currently, however, just 16% of non-Christians in their late teens and twenties said they have a "good impression" of Christianity.

Maybe part of our problem is our own definition of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Although this poll is disturbing, other polls still show that 83% of Americans describe themselves as "Christian." What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

In the infancy of Christianity, the institution of a religion with its positive and negative fea-

tures was not a part of the life experience of early believers. In the beginning, those who followed Jesus were simply known as people of The Way. Most of them were still a part of the religious system of Judaism. The people of The Way were simply people who believed that Jesus had fulfilled their own religious experience; they had found the Messiah and it was Jesus of Nazareth. The early believer was someone who was simply trying to follow the words and actions of Jesus. It was during the early church years in Antioch that others began to call followers of Jesus "Christians," meaning "little Christs." It could have been a derogatory name or one of observance, depending on who was uttering the words.

The point I want to make is that "Christian" today is defined in many ways. For some it is a cultural designation. For others it is a national designation. Still for others it is a set of beliefs that, when asked, one might espouse. Yet, Jesus told his first disciples that they were to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The eleven were to teach these new followers how to observe all Jesus has taught them. Then Jesus promised to be with them in that process to the very end.

We refer to this command of Jesus as the Great Commission. It compels us to go and share our faith, but it also gives us insight into the qualities of true discipleship. What should be some of the qualities in our lives if we are true disciples of Jesus?

First, let me suggest that true discipleship is intentional. Jesus commanded them to go and make disciples. This command does not

suggest that discipleship will just happen in a haphazard manner, rather with intent and knowledge of that intent. The words “go” and “make” have specific meaning. The word “go” can be interpreted “to leave where you are and to intentionally go to another place to share the gospel.” For years we have interpreted this text to mean that there must be a leaving behind and a going to for disciple making to occur. To be sure, this word has that sense of intentionality that drives our mission efforts; however, the word also means “as you go” with the concept of “being aware as you go” or “as you live” of the process of disciple making. Either interpretation has the connotation of intentionality.

In the same way the word “make” has the quality of intentionality. The word is really a compound word that is disciple making and is written in this tense. It is something that happens in the past yet has a continuous action. People come to Jesus and become disciples; however, the task of disciple making is a continuous task, not only for us to perform but to occur in our lives. Thus, this process has to be intentional for it is occurring. It has happened and it is still happening.

We cannot be disciples of Jesus without being intentional about our relationship with Jesus. If we admire someone and their abilities and think to ourselves “I would like to be like this person,” then there are some choices we make to achieve that desire. We might read about them or read something they wrote. If we were given the chance, we would quickly say “Yes” to an internship or even just some time spent with the individual. We would want to continually learn from this person as we work to make the same attributes a part of our lives.

That is the intentionality of disciple making. To be a disciple of Jesus requires that we become intentional about our faith. William O. Paulsell wrote “It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner. There will be a need for some intentional commitment and some reorganization in our lives.”¹

How are you being intentional about your discipleship? It will not just happen. We must reorganize our lives to place our relationship with Jesus above our other priorities. Discipleship is intentional.

Secondly, discipleship requires conversion of the heart and life. Jesus says that we are to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism in the New Testament was neither something that someone did for another nor what one did without a personal decision in Christ. Infant baptism was foreign to the New Testament believers; baptism was always the outward expression of an inward reality, with the inward reality being a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. When Jesus told his disciples to baptize these new disciples there was the implication of conversion.

Therefore, discipleship is an intentional decision and it requires conversion. We cannot be disciples of Jesus without first placing our faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Jesus said it best when he told Nicodemus “You must be born again.” What does this mean? It means that we need to admit that we have sinned against God, we are in need of forgiveness, we believe that what Jesus did on the cross is the payment for our sins, we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, and we believe that by simply asking Jesus to forgive us and be Lord of our lives, we can pass from “death to life.” When we make that decision, then we are recreated from the inside out. There is an exchange for an old way of living and thinking toward a new way of living and thinking. Most of all, it is a conversion of the way God views us. For when we accept Jesus as our Savior, God no longer sees our sinfulness but Jesus’ righteousness. So, through Jesus we have salvation and eternal life.

Make no mistake about it: to be a disciple of Jesus begins with a conversion experience with Jesus. One is impossible without the other. Was your baptism an outward expression of an inward conversion? A disciple of Jesus is one who has been changed by the love of God through Jesus Christ.

A third quality of a disciple is also a person who is in the process of learning to be like Jesus. Jesus says that we are to make disciples, which we have already determined is a process that begins with a point in the past and continues, but also that the disciples should teach these new disciples. If there is teaching, then there must be the need for learning. So, a disciple of Jesus is devoted to learning about the life and instruction of Jesus. We are to learn what Jesus instructed us to do.

The word “disciple” means “someone who is attached to” or “apprenticed to.” We learn from Jesus not only information but formation. To be a learner with Jesus is about two-part growth. First, there is the information – we need the information about Jesus if we are going to be formed into the image of Jesus. We need to read the Bible and we need to know what Jesus said and what Jesus did. One of our problems in being disciples these days is our failure to know the Bible and what it says about Jesus.

It is believed that only 25% of Christians in America read the Bible daily. We all have the feeling of not knowing the Bible as we should. We need information; that is, we need to read the Bible to know what Jesus did and taught.

However, a disciple is not merely a learner with information. In many ways, a disciple is more like an apprentice of a craftsman than a student of a professor. You gain knowledge, but then you put the knowledge to work until the knowledge becomes so much a part of you that it is who you are. This is the formation part of the disciple who is the learner.

In Dadeville, Alabama, two men got into a Bible-quoting contest outside one of their apartments in the summer of 1996. Gabel Taylor, 38, the brother of a preacher, got into a shouting match with another Dadeville resident as to who knew the most Scripture. They began fighting over one particular passage, and the fellow who lost the contest went into his house, got his gun, shot Taylor in the face and killed him.

Information without formation fails us. How this works in the Christian’s life is that we gain the information by reading, studying and reflecting on the Bible, then we put it to work in our daily living. When we encounter one in need, we remember how Jesus acted toward the needy and we do likewise. When we encounter difficult people, we remember Jesus’ actions of forgiveness and lack of revenge and we act the same. When we are troubled by life, we remember the promises of Jesus to be with us and to bring us comfort; we focus our thinking on these promises, and we find encouragement and comfort. Soon, as we gain more information and we put this information to work, something happens – we are changed. We discover that our natural reaction to situations be-

gins to reflect the actions of Jesus. It begins with intention and it ends with formation. We are changed by information and formation. So, as disciples we must be learners.

A fourth quality of discipleship is obedience. Jesus said very plainly “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” Jesus tells us that we are to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey or observe everything he has commanded us. One of the attributes of being a disciple is to obey the commands of Jesus.

After years of planning and preparing, this past November Robin and I were able to spend our 25th Anniversary in Hawaii. For us it was a trip of a lifetime. It was an active vacation, not one filled with lying on the beach and soaking up the rays. We snorkeled, we traveled to the southernmost tip of the United States, we rode bicycles down a volcano, and we went horse back riding in the Valipo Valley. When we arrived at the stables in the valley, we were paired up with our horses. Mine was named Nitro. “Just my luck,” I thought. But I didn’t want to look afraid so I acted like Nitro suited me just fine. Unexpectedly, Nitro never did anything out of the usual on the trail, which became part of my frustration with him. I would try to steer him around tree or down a path on the trail, but Nitro wouldn’t pay attention to my direction. Perhaps a better way to describe his attitude towards me would have been annoyance. He was annoyed that there was someone trying to tell him where to go and how fast to go. He had done this over and over and it was as if he was saying to me “Just sit back and enjoy the ride. I am not going to do anything different or new.”

Sometimes I wonder if I am not a little, or maybe a lot, like Nitro. God nudges me in a certain direction or asks me to go a little slower through a specific circumstance or to hurry up and get on with doing His will, but I am stubborn. I simply resist and say to God, “Stop annoying me, I know what is best. I am going to do it my way.” In my stubbornness, I miss the joy that comes from obedience to God’s direction.

A disciple of Jesus learns that obedience to God is always the best way of living. To be obedient might take time to learn a new way of living and thinking. It will always require an act of faith that takes us from our comfortable place to a new ex-

perience. But I have learned over the years that when I am willing to be obedient to God, I am also being pleasing to God. We cannot please God without obedience. A disciple is obedient.

The last quality I want to mention is that the disciple desires the presence of Jesus in his life. Jesus said “I will be with you till the end of the age.” It is the reminder that although Jesus calls us and sends us, he does not let us go alone. Jesus goes with us. Which to me begs the question, “Do I want Jesus along for my journey? Do I find myself resisting the presence of Jesus? Do I find myself avoiding the thoughts of Jesus’ presence?” I believe an authentic disciple ultimately yearns for God’s presence. It is not that we always have this desire, but we know deep inside that once we have tasted of God, nothing less than a second taste and another and another is enough for us.

David exclaimed in the beautiful Psalm 42 “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” The disciple yearns for God’s presence.

Eugene Peterson compares two words for disciple. He suggests that too many disciples today are tourists; such discipleship amounts to a visit to a religious ceremony or even a weekly jaunt to church. We might be tourists at the newest and latest religious entertainment or with the new personality who somehow has the latest truth to share. Yet, he concludes that discipleship is more like the word “pilgrim.” Pilgrims are people who spend their lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ.²

Henrietta Mears was a woman who accomplished much for the cause of Christ. Teaching young adults at the Hollywood Presbyterian Church she had a great influence on others. She influenced Christian leaders like Billy Graham, Bill Bright and Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson. Frustrated that many in crowded L.A. had nowhere to go and be quiet to listen for God’s voice, she traveled to the San Gabriel Mountains and convinced a man to sell his property to her. She transformed that property into Forest Home, one of the premier

spiritual retreat centers. She wrote volumes of Bible Commentary to help her students understand the Bible. She did these mighty things in a day when many did not think a woman should be doing this. She did not care she was only taking one step at a time and being obedient to her Lord. On her death bed, she was asked if there was anything she wished she could have done, if she could live her life over again. She simply said “If I had to do it all over again, I would have trusted Christ more.”³

Mears was a pilgrim and not a tourist. Which word describes your discipleship? We do not want to get to the end of our life and lament “I wish I would have trusted Christ more.” We do not want to get to the end of our journey in life and discover we did not take it with our Lord Jesus. What we need is discipleship — discipleship that is intentional, a result of conversion, is an ongoing process of maturity, is marked by our obedience, and yearns more and more for the very presence of God. ✨

¹William O. Paulsell, “Ways of Prayer: Designing a Personal Rule,” *Weavings*, September/October, 1987.

²Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 12-13.

³John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2001), 88.

