

“The End of Christian America?-Part 3”

Introduction

You guys have been listening to me the last couple of weeks and I am grateful for it. I know because you’ve been talking to me.

One of you said, “It’s easy to say we need to change. The real question is what need, to change?” Just so you know, it was my question before you asked it. It’s kept me awake a lot of nights these last several months. Here’s my answer.

Take out your outline and write your name in the first blank of the sentence just below the title. Now fill in the rest of the sentence this way. Bill or Kathi or Joe needs to be a disciple of Jesus who makes disciples who in turn make disciples.

In the new context I’ve been talking about cold disciples won’t do and lukewarm disciples will still make God sick. It requires disciples of Jesus who are on fire to serve Him. It will require disciples who make disciples who in turn are disciple makers themselves.

For too long I have been settling for getting people to become active members of First Christian rather than focusing on making people into disciples of Jesus. This is what I mean. For a long time I’ve been a little bit happy if someone decided to worship with us. I’ve gotten a little bit happier if they decided to join the church and become a member. And we have been ecstatic if a new member became an active participant in the

life of our church. If a person came forward at the end of a service and joined the church and then rolled up their sleeves and went to work in the life of our congregation, I've sort of felt like we had done our job as a church. I don't think I've ever said it but getting people to be active participants in the life of our congregation has functioned as the goal of all our work.

Today I am raising the bar. My goal is for everyone of you to become the kind of disciple of Jesus who makes disciples who in turn makes disciples.

If we are going to be disciples who make disciples we are going to have to think about how disciples are made. That's why we're spending so much time with Matthew 28:16-20. In it I believe Jesus gives us a description of the process he uses to making disciples and He wants us to help him with the process.

My study has convinced me that becoming a disciple of Jesus is a process with four discernable phases. Let me show you what I've found about how Jesus makes disciples and how he wants us to help.

1. In the first phase of becoming a disciple Jesus delivers the would-be disciple from their bondage to sin and death.

A would-be disciple must first be delivered from his or her bondage to sin and death by Jesus.

Jesus' own words were, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Jesus said that to enter the kingdom of God you must be born anew and every birth involves a

delivery.

The work of delivering the would-be disciple from their bondage to sin and death is Jesus' work. He's already paid the price for that delivery through His death on the cross. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's amen to that work. In order for the would-be Christian to accept Jesus' gift of deliverance from sin and death, they must first comprehend the good news of God's love.

This is where we come in to this process. Disciples who make disciple makers are mid-wives to the delivery whenever we share our knowledge of God and His unfathomable love with a pre-Christian.

There are two ways we can share our knowledge of God and His love.

First, and this is A under point number one-

A. We act as mid-wives to the birth of new disciples by telling them the stories of Jesus.

The only place that the knowledge of God and His indescribable love is found is in the pages of the Bible. Christianity is a revealed religion. Every page, every story, every word of this Book is about God and His incredible love for all of creation and especially for the pinnacle of creation, humankind. While it is in every story in the Bible, God's love is most clearly seen in the stories about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Disciple-makers tell and re-tell the stories of Jesus. We need to tell and retell them to one another, but we must find ways to tell and retell those stories to the unbelieving world.

When they hear the stories of Jesus they will come to know God and His great love for them. They need to hear the story of him healing the blind, making the lame to walk and cast out the demons of mental illness from those who were possessed (Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 8:26-39). They need to hear the story of him feeding the 5000 with a few loaves and fish (Luke 9:10-17). They need to watch as he calms the storm by speaking to it (Luke 8:22– 25). They need to watch as he reaches out to the last and the least of this world. They need to see him touch the man with leprosy and forgive the woman caught in adultery. They need to watch as he restores life to those who are dead (Luke).

Secondly, and this is B under point number one

B. We as midwives to the birth of new disciples by loving them the way in Jesus loved them.

The most powerful tool we have at our disposal for delivering the pre-Christians in our midst from their bondage to sin and death is God's love and mercy and grace made flesh in our love, our mercy and our grace. God's people must bear an uncanny resemblance to the Jesus you read about in the gospels. We must be warm and compassionate like Him. We must stop in the middle of what they are doing and offer compassion and help to someone in need like He did. We must love each other deeply from the heart just like Jesus loves us.

Listen carefully to me for a minute. We especially need to share the knowledge of God and his love for humankind by loving those who are the most difficult to love. We need to find ways to show God's love to the last and the least of this world as Jesus did. We especially need to find ways to love the alcoholic and the pedophile, the sexually immoral and the

homosexual, the poor and the homeless. We cannot love those that are the most difficult to love out of our own resources. It will be God loving them through us and only God loving them through us.

It is this first phase of becoming a disciple that Jesus when he tells his disciples in verse 19 to “*baptize his disciples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*”

Everyone who would receive the gift of salvation, who wants to be delivered from their bondage to sin and death, will repent. They will admit to God and themselves they are a sinner. They will admit they have lived their life the way they wanted to without regard to God and His will.

In the New Testament whenever someone accepted God’s offer of salvation, they went through a special ceremony to mark the occasion. They went through the ceremony because it was what Jesus told them to do. Baptism in the New Testament was a way to draw a line in the sand between their old life and their new life. It was a way for the new convert to publicly confess Jesus before men. It was a way of saying, “I belong to Jesus.”

The day that Alyson was born is a day that is fixed indelibly in my memory. Immediately after Alyson came into this world the nurses put a little bracelet on her that said, Hodge Baby. The bracelet marked her as a member of our family. Baptism marks us as members of God’s family both for ourselves and for the rest of the world.

The new birth is marked by _____ and _____.

Fill in the blank under the second point with the word “development” so that it now reads:

2. The second phase in the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus can be described with the word development.

The disciple in process must be developed by Jesus.

In the first century every parent wanted their son to become a rabbi, and the only way you could become a rabbi was to be trained by a rabbi. You had to be invited to become a disciple of an existing rabbi. The invitation to become a disciple, to follow a rabbi was a high honor for any boy to receive. Boys were usually selected to be disciples around the age of 14-15 and they follow him for the next 15 or so years. Rabbis were teachers so their disciples would work hard to learn everything their rabbi taught. But the relationship between a disciple and his rabbi was much deeper than that of a student to a teacher. The disciple wanted to be like his rabbi and do the things that his rabbi did.

According to Jesus, in the second phase of becoming a disciple, we become surrogate teachers by participate in this phase of the disciple making process by:

“Teaching them to obey everything He commanded his disciples.” Verse 20A

In the development stage of becoming a disciple (and this is A under point number 2)

A. A disciple learns to obey everything what Jesus taught.

I can hear what you're thinking. "Preacher, I've been a disciple of Jesus for 50 years and I still don't think I know all that Jesus taught." My answer is, "yes you do. You just don't know that you know it."

Let me explain. Jesus was a 1st century Jewish rabbi. Jewish rabbis of the first century were sometimes asked to summarize their teachings by asking them the question, "What is the greatest commandment?" The rabbi being questioned would then condense all of his teaching into one sentence or two. When Jesus was asked this question, he responded by saying,

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:38-40

You might want to consider memorizing this verse. According to Jesus everything He taught is summarized in these forty-seven words. If you know them, you can say truthfully you know everything that Jesus taught.

During the development phase of becoming a disciple we are learning to love God and our neighbors the way that Jesus loves God and those same neighbors.

There's more here. In the development stage of becoming a disciple (and this is B under point number 2)

B. As we develop as disciples of Jesus we learn to emulate who Jesus was.

Our new born disciple need to know what Jesus is like. Again, you're going to say to me, "Preacher, that's a tough question to answer." And again, I'm going to say, "It's not as tough as we sometimes make it."

In his letter to the congregation at Corinth the Apostle Paul wrote what I believe is the best description of what Jesus is like. He is describing what love is like but if you exchange the name "Jesus" for the word love you will get a very clear picture of what Jesus was like.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

You might want to consider memorizing this verse. The development phase of becoming a disciple in part is about learning to be patient and kind, not envious or boastful or proud. It's about learning how not to be rude or self-seeking. It's about learning how now to be easily angered and how not to keep a record of wrongs done to us. It's about learning to delight in the truth instead of complaining about the evil. It's about learning to trust, hope and persevere. And in all those cases it's about learning to be like Jesus.

Learning to obey all that Jesus commanded and becoming like Jesus is not something you can do on your own. You will not develop as a disciple just by trying hard. You needed God to help you in the first phase of becoming a disciple, and you will need His help in the second phase as well. The Bible teaches that when we are born again God gives us the gift

of the Holy Spirit. Talking about this gift Paul writes in Ephesians

“Having believed, you were marking in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possessions.” (Ephesians 1:13-14)

At the new birth the Holy Spirit takes up residence in you to oversee and guide the development process. You may not always feel the presence of the Holy Spirit but rest in the truth of the promise that He is there. The Holy Spirit was given to you by God to oversee this development process.

As you learn to obey all that Jesus did and as you are transformed by the Holy Spirit to be like Jesus you will be *“livin a life worthy of the calling you have received.”* (Ephesians 4:1) It won’t be something you do at 702 N. Mound on Sunday. It is something we do at work, at home, at the gym and at school. Every minute of every hour of every day, every action and every thought is a part of our *“offering of ourselves as living sacrifices wholly and acceptable to God”* (Romans 12:1)

Now fill in the blank in the third point with the word, “deployment.”

3. The third phase can be described using the word deployment.

The would-be disciple must be deployed by Jesus in helping to continue His work.

The work that Jesus intended the church to continue is what Jesus pointed to with the very first words of the Great Commission.

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.” Matthew 28:19

He referred to it in the words that he used to call his first disciples.

“Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19

The deployed disciple begins to utilize their spiritual gifts, time and energy in the work of the church which is to continue the work of Jesus.

Let me say this gently so as not to offend anyone unnecessarily. Some may take offense at this but I don't want your offense to be because of the way I have said it.

This is the place where we have fallen down on the job. We have allowed the work of Jesus which the church is to continue to be reduced to teaching Sunday school or serving on a committee or writing a check to give to someone less fortunate than ourselves. We have allowed the work of Jesus to be reduced to getting people to be active participants in the life of a congregation. The work of the church is to continue the work of Jesus and the work of Jesus was making disciples who make disciples.

The work of making disciples very well may include teaching a Sunday school class or serving on a committee or writing a check to give to someone less fortunate than ourselves, but the work of making disciples will be so much more than these things.

We have failed to help would-be disciples to understand that being a disciple means continuing Jesus' work of disciple-making.

If you pick up and read one of the New Testament gospels you will discover Jesus spent most of his time and energy and reserved his best lessons for the people he invited to be his disciples. Think about that for a minute. The Son of God poured most of his time and energy for three years into twelve men in order to turn them into disciples who knew what he did, were like him in every way and did the things he did.

If the goal of being a disciple is to learn what their rabbi knows, be like Him and do what He does then Jesus' disciples are going to have to become disciple-makers.

And this change will start with me. I cannot ask you to do something that I am unwilling or unable to do myself. Last week I suggested that Jesus' ministry was all about making disciples who made disciples who made disciples. He had a list of men he poured himself into in order to transforming them from fishermen and tax collectors into disciple who made disciples who made disciples. From the first day they left their nets and followed him, he was busy turning them into disciples who made disciples who made disciples.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I am going to be initiating some relationships with a few people that I can pour myself into in order to transform them from bankers and lawyers and carpenters and sales clerks into disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

I am also issuing an invitation to the elders of this church to do the same. These men are the spiritual leaders of our congregation. Unless they become disciples who make disciples who make disciples our

congregation cannot become a congregation of disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Right now you are saying to yourself, “I don’t know how to make disciples? Isn’t that the work of the expert? Don’t you need to go to seminary to learn how to do that? You don’t need a seminary degree to learn how to make disciples. You can start learning how to make disciples by re-reading one of the new Testament gospels and watching Jesus as he is transforming Peter and James and John and the other twelve into disciples. There is no one better equipped to teach you how to make disciples than the Master Disciple-Maker, Jesus himself and how he did it can be found in the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Another good idea is to find another Christian who is busy making disciples and watch that person as they work. There is no better way to learn how to make disciples than to actually do that work with someone who knows how to do it. You can memorize the gospels and read every book ever written on the subject. You can spend hours and hours watching someone else do it and you won’t learn how to do it until you actually attempt it.

Fill in the blank in the fourth point with the word, “graduation.” I started off calling it death but I was afraid I’d confuse someone with that word.

4. The fourth phase of the disciple making process is graduation.

Eventually the process of becoming a disciple will draw to a conclusion and you will be that which you have so long dreamed about being. The last stage of becoming a disciple of Jesus lies in the future. One of two things will happen to you at some point in the future. Either you will die

or Jesus will return to take his followers home to live forever with him. At that point, the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus will be completed, and you will be made like Jesus. You will be fully mature in Christ. It won't happen by your intentional efforts but by the awesome power of God. Paul says it this way:

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed” (1st Corinthians 15:51-52).

As you grow in Christ you will experience successes and you will experience failures. You'll find yourself growing and learning and maturing one minute and the next minute you will do something that you know disappoints and hurts Jesus and you'll be disappointed in yourself. You may even wonder if you really have been born again. Take heart and do not be discouraged. The conclusion of the process of becoming a disciple is assured. We agree with Paul who was *“confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

Conclusion

Now let me share one final thing with you. A week rarely passes that I do not have someone say I want a deeper, closer relationship to Jesus.

A lot of times those people will sign up for Bible study after Bible study. And for a while they find the closeness to Jesus they have been seeking but then the Bible study ends and that closeness disappears and they are right back where they started.

Sometimes these people begin to listen to one or more preachers on the radio or TV. And they'll buy tapes and books and all sorts of teaching material in order to have the deeper and closer relationship to Jesus for which they are looking, but pretty soon they are right back where they started. They are looking for a closer, deeper relationship with Jesus.

It is a closer deeper relationship with Jesus you have been seeking. That kind of relationship is to be found only by those who follow Jesus in the work of making disciples. He headed off to make disciples and you didn't go with him. He hasn't withdrawn from you. You have withdrawn from Him. If you start following Jesus again, I wonder if you won't discover that for which you are seeking.