

A Call to Disciple-making

Matthew 28:16-20

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John was a good friend. We went through Junior High youth together at the church we attended. His family and ours regularly went to church. We went to Senior High youth group. We went to youth retreats and special events together. We sat through countless services and messages. We heard youth speakers and looked forward to life beyond high school. But then in our post high school years John began to hang out with different people. He began to say different things. And before I knew it he was gone from church – gone from our group and gone from a lot of what we believed through those years in youth group. What happened?

Jim was another good friend – a missionary kid. I met him in High School and he began to hang around our little group of friends at school and church. He was a really good guy and I enjoyed spending time with him. We played some hockey together and looked forward to what University would bring. But then he began to change. He began to do things and try things that were quite different from our high school years. Until one day he told me he didn't believe it anymore. "What do you mean by it," I asked. "Everything. Christianity. Church. God – the existence of God. I don't believe any of it." And he was gone.

Susan was another friend. She too grew up in a youth group and attended church regularly with her family. She went to summer camps and was really tight with her group of church friends. Then she graduated from high school. She got her degree and career. Though we lived in different cities, we kept in touch. She even came to visit a few times. Then one day we heard about a boyfriend. We were happy for her. Then we learned she was living with her boyfriend. They hardly went to church – just on Christmas and Easter to keep up the tradition. And if we tried to bring up anything related to her Christian faith it was met hostility or dismissed. And she was gone.

I've seen this happen over and over again with friends from High School, friends from camp, friends from mission's team and friends from Bible College and Seminary. I've seen it happen in families of churches I've pastored over the past 25 years. A family participates in a church. They bring their kids along. They all seem pretty happy to be there. But when the kids get out on their own, their real beliefs become clear. They stop coming. And often stop believing.

Statistics bear this out. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada commissioned a study on young adults leaving the church. They entitled it "Hemorrhaging Faith." It concluded that only one in three Canadian young adults who attended

church weekly as a child still does so today. So that's 66% or 2/3 have left. Of the young adults who no longer attend church, half stopped identifying themselves with the Christian tradition in which they were raised.¹

Clare Degraaf is a businessman and an elder in a church. For over 25 years, he's been a spiritual mentor of men. Every once in a while, he gets a call from frantic parents whose young adult son or daughter has left the church and maybe even the faith. They ask Clare to meet with their son or daughter confessing they never should have let the kid go to that godless college or hang out with that person. Because he's approachable and loves to listen he often gets one meeting with them.

He summarizes the multiple conversations he's had with young adults. They basically follow this pattern. He said "When I was just a kid, I believed it all because I was clueless. But, as I grew older, I began to notice something was wrong. There was an obvious disconnect between what I read in the Bible and what I saw taking place in our family and my church. I noticed my dad lying about my age to get a children's ticket at the movies. My mom is a good person, but she really got into soap operas and reality shows that even to a kid seemed completely opposite to the life Jesus would celebrate, but she'd insist that I watch only "good shows".

I'd listen to my parents scream at each other half way to church, but be all smiles and love when they hit the church doors. Everyone in church would sing enthusiastically "I surrender all", knowing full well they had no intention of surrendering all. They would greet people with a hug or handshake after the service, but gossip about them in the car on the way home.

Our pastor would preach that Christians should care for the poor, the helpless and protect strangers. Then my parents would vote for candidates who advocated just the opposite, even as they sat in the family room planning our next nice vacation. "This country just can't afford it!" they'd shout out at some political ad on our 50 inch flat screen TV. It's clear to me that they believe in the abundant life for themselves, but not for everyone else. My pastor was a good guy, but obviously his sheep weren't listening or just don't care.

My parents' lives revolved around our church and their Christian friends, but I was taught that Jesus hung out at parties, with sinners and with what in his day were liberals and irreligious people.

¹ <http://tgcfcanada.org/hemorrhagingfaith/>

I tried to talk to them about some of these things, but they just said I was being idealistic. But, isn't that what Christianity is? Didn't Jesus call us to such a radical faith that it would change both us and the world?

He continues. "Here's what I think: I think my parents and the church, in general, have settled for a pragmatic Christianity. They believe in the teachings of Jesus theologically, but they don't actually obey him because so few other Christians are. My parents say they love God and maybe they do, but it just seems to me that if Christianity were true it would produce better people."

Degraaf writes "There it is. I'm tempted to remind him of all the amazing things true followers of Jesus have done and are still doing all over the world to live out the gospel courageously. But, his accusations aren't targeted at them. They're aimed at the average Christian who claims to love God and others more than themselves, but don't appear to be doing either, very well.

I've learned this much over the years; my generation, (let's generously say, over 45) begin with the assumption the Bible is God's Word and that traditional, conservative Christian doctrine is an accurate expression of God's truth. And, if we believe that Jesus was and is the Son of God, died on the cross and rose again, and "accept Christ", then we're Christians.

However, the next generation is far less concerned about doctrinal correctness than we are. They think Christians ought to live like Jesus to be Christian. Imagine that! We too wonder why Christianity doesn't always produce better people. And, as hard as it is to admit, it's true – in different ways each of us have resigned ourselves to a form of Christianity that we can actually *do*; church on Sundays, Bible study on Tuesday mornings, volunteering in the children's ministry and generally trying to live a more moral life than "the world". As a result and without any conscious decision on our part, *good enough* has become our benchmark. But a "good enough" approach is kryptonite for any true follower of Jesus.²

Now I wonder if any of this is true about our church and us. There are many reasons why young people and young adults leave churches. I'm not here today to judge but I wonder if you can relate to any of this? I wonder if you know anyone like those I've shared about. Some of you have children or grandchildren who continue to walk in the faith. Others have children or grandchildren who have left the church and some have left the faith.

² <http://www.claredegraaf.com/2014/01/27/conversations-with-young-christians-leaving-the-church/>

We cannot change the past. We are where we are. But where we are greatly concerns me. In 2010-11 God kept placing me in situations where I had to access to people's honest conversations about where they were at spiritually. I listened, talked a little and asked questions. I heard little or no talk about waking with and depending on God. I became more and more aware that some of the very basic Christian practices were absent from the lives of young and middle age adults. I discovered little or no Bible reading; little knowledge of the Bible; prayer only in emergency situations; little or no idea about a daily walk with God; little or no life dependence on God. So I sensed we needed to do something to try to connect our people with God through His Word. So we did Read the Bible for Life in the Fall of 2011 and into 2012 to get an understanding of the Big Story of the Bible.

Then last year we focused on prayer. We looked at the book Transforming Prayer and ways to deepen our prayer lives. We examined the Bible's prayer book – Psalms and learned a little of how to use it in our own prayers. But my alarm and concern continues.

I think it crystallized or became clearer this past spring and summer.

I believe we have followed what many churches of the evangelical tradition have done. We have made decisions for Christ mandatory. We have made discipleship under Christ optional. We have insisted that it's vital to come to Christ, receive Him into your heart and be baptized. And then we hope you grow in Christ somehow. We have subtly communicated that we really want you to come, join us and be baptized. Then we want you to grow. We want you to come to Sunday School and Small Groups and learn together. But it's optional. If you want to get involved further that's great. But we have failed, I have failed to continually emphasize and model a growing walk with Christ.

So we have in some ways become what Francis Chan calls a "Come, be baptized and listen in one place" community. Once you're baptized and a member you can just sit back and be fed. Watch the paid staff and their helpers perform and feed you. And if they're not doing it well enough, there's always another church where they do it better.

But Jesus did not call us to go and make decisions for Christ. He called every Christian to make disciples for Christ. In the Great Commission at the end of Matthew 28:16-20 – Jesus says "All authority has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit and

teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. A disciple; A follower of Jesus not just a believer in Jesus. A disciple certainly needs to get baptized. But that's only the beginning of the Christian life. A disciple is one who is taught to obey everything Jesus commanded. So it is not good enough for a church to say we've got them in the door; they got baptized and joined us. A church and its people must disciple believers so that they obey what Jesus commanded and then become disciple makers themselves. Certainly, SVBC has been strong in the teaching area of ministry. But we must go further in actually teaching and showing what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in everyday life.

But here's where my alarm continued to grow. I sensed that many people in this congregation don't understand their own need for discipleship let alone their need to disciple other Christians. Some don't seem to know what is the life of a Christ Follower:

(Ushers – will you come now and hand out the picture that's been prepared.)

So what does the life of a disciple of Christ look like? Last fall I began to draw a picture. I'm a terrible artist. So I asked for help and ideas. It started with the pastors; then the rest of the staff; then with the leadership. We've attempted to come up with something that will at least give you a picture of the pieces and practices in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. I want everyone here to have a copy of this picture.

The left side of this picture has a column entitled connecting to Christ. There we've listed some of the steps or events that happen in a person's life when they initially connect with Christ. So we come to God – we begin to grasp that He is Father, Son and Spirit. We learn we're separated from God by our sin. We recognize our need to repent of our sins and receive Christ. So we repent. We receive Christ. Receive the Holy Spirit. We may get baptized. We share our testimony at our baptismal service. We commit to and join a church.

But that's only the beginning of the Christian life. I've very intentionally left a gap between the column on the left and the box on the right. Because I believe it is this gap that people often fail to bridge after they come to Christ. They're excited after their baptism. But then their initial passion runs out. They may not know how to pray. They may not read the Bible or may not know how. No one shows them what it looks like to follow God and the Holy Spirit. They don't have other Christians they regularly meet with to spur them on in their faith. Though they've received Christ, they may not really understand the Gospel and there's no one that clearly explains it to them. They may understand the

concept of spiritual gifts but they can't see themselves having any. They're too shy to ask about it or there's no place in their church to use their gift. Or their church doesn't even expect them to serve. So busyness takes over. And they don't use their spiritual gifts. They may have heard that God commands us to use our resources for His purposes. But they'll think about getting around to that when they're established in their career. They know the word holiness but they don't really know what it means. They see little difference in the lives of Christians they know compared to non-Christians. So they conclude holiness must mean singing songs on Sunday and feeling a little sad over something they did. And they aren't really aware of a "Christian world view" nor have they been equipped to deal with doubts about the faith. So they stay in the realm of connecting with Christ and conclude their OK until they die. Then Jesus will bring them to heaven.

Then because they haven't really experienced God or a relationship with Him, they begin to wonder a little about whether or not he's real. They fail in their attempts at prayer. They find the Bible really difficult to read or connect to. They've got enough to do in life let alone fit in some small group gathering. They think that worship is something that only happens on Sundays. If they don't like the songs picked or the way they were played, they conclude there was no worship that Sunday. They find the concept of "sharing the Gospel" offensive because everyone around them says there are many ways to God. Maybe they see no connection between their belief in God and their finances. The people who don't believe in God sure seem to have a lot more fun and joy in life.

Maybe they never saw their parents pray or put emphasis on the Bible. Maybe their parents never talked about their walk with God. Maybe their parents never modelled the importance of connecting with a small group or serving others or giving or struggling against sin and the devil and the world.

Then one day a college professor comes at them with some really convincing arguments about the silliness of the Bible. Maybe a roommate or boyfriend or girlfriend has arguments against the existence of God. And they have no good response. Maybe they see non-Christians who are more authentic and honest than Christians. Maybe they just get busy. The gap is never bridged between connecting to Christ and growing/maturing in Christ. Then one day they're on their own out from under their parent's authority and it's very easy to walk away.

A disciple of Jesus Christ moves beyond the connecting to Christ stage. They begin to experience God and learn to be led by the Holy Spirit. They begin to recognize that they cannot live the Christian life apart from Christ. So

they begin to pray. Though they don't understand parts of the Bible, they still read it. They still listen to it and trust God to speak to them through it. As they expose themselves to God's Word, He corrects, rebukes and instructs and changes. They desire to obey God's Word.

They begin to recognize that they must turn their worship away from themselves and the things of this world to their Lord, Christ. They begin to understand that worship is all about giving God worth and living in a way that gives God glory in all they do.

They begin to realize that they cannot live the Christian life alone. They can't overcome this sin on their own. They need Christ and the Holy Spirit and other Christians to help them. So they connect with other Christians regularly to encourage and be encouraged.

They're convinced by the Gospel and begin to share it. They learn about spiritual gifts and ask God to reveal theirs to them. They learn that their resources of time, talent, opportunities and finances are not ultimately their own. They all belong to God and must be used for His glory. So they begin to change their lives to reflect this reality.

As they pray, read God's Word and worship and talk deeply with other Christians, the sinfulness in their lives is exposed more and more. So by the power of the Holy Spirit and with the prayers of other Christians, they begin to leave behind sinful behavior. Their lives begin to look different than the lives of those who don't know Christ. They begin to learn the Christian world view and face their doubts head on. They turn to other Christians to talk about questions from science and they grow in answering objections to the existence of God or a moral law or the origin of the universe. They become more and more convinced of the truth of the Bible and that there really is only one way to God and those who do not know Jesus are going to Hell.

As they begin growing they experience maturity in some areas. They realize they will never perfect any of these areas. But they can grow in them. They especially recognize that their Christian life does not only concern themselves. They are reminded of Jesus' calling to Go and make disciples of Jesus – baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit and teaching them to obey all commanded. So they realize they are called to fulfill this commission. They begin to look around at others.

They see other believers who need discipleship and encouragement – starting at home. They see a spouse – children who need discipleship. They see others in the church who need it. So they set aside time to meet regularly to show and teach them how to follow Christ.

They begin to see their friends; family; coworkers; neighbors; bus buddies and people around the world as those who don't know Christ are going to Hell. They begin to be grieved for them and don't want them to be lost and miss out. They pray for them and gently, respectfully, lovingly and regularly explore life issues with them in hopes of their coming to Christ.

The box on the right has these different areas of the life of a disciple. Underneath you see that blue line like a spectrum or continuing. Disciples of Christ will find themselves somewhere along each line. At some points their stronger and growing in one area but this area they're just beginning to discover. All these actions, response and practices do not make you a Christian. They are all done in response to God's saving work in your life. Response to the Gospel.

So my first question for you today is where are you on this picture? You might not know Christ at all and have lots of questions. You're on the left side of this diagram. You might be a new Christian and just be connecting to Christ. You're somewhere in the first column. You might have been baptized and connected to Christ long ago. But you haven't done much since. You might be in the gap. Or as you look at the growing/maturing box, you might see some of those areas where you are nearing the maturing side of the spectrum. But in other areas your just in the learning phase. So I want you plot where you are on this continuums or sliding scales right now.

Question 2 – What is your next step as a disciple of Christ? Every Christian has entered into a life long journey of following Christ. We all need continuing maturing. But where do you sense you need to grow? Where do you sense you need encouragement? The First John series has challenged us with some very pointed questions.

Are you walking in light or darkness? Are you keeping the commandments or ignoring them? Are you harboring hate in your heart? Do you love the world? Are you practicing sinning or practicing righteousness?

Question 3 – What is your next step as a disciple maker? Every Christian is called to be a disciple maker. Who are you discipling right now? Who has God placed in your life that you need to disciple? (I don't even know how to start – we'll answer that and provide.)

Fathers it is your responsibility to lead your family spiritually. What have you done about that? How are you modeling this? What have you put in place in your family that will lead and guide your children and spouse to grow as disciples?

Fathers and Mothers – You have the primary responsibility to disciple your children. The children, youth and college career ministry can support you in this role. But you are ultimately responsible. So what are you doing to intentionally disciple your children in your home?

Grandparents – What are you doing to disciple your grandchildren? You may have children that are not walking with the Lord. But you have a unique opportunity to influence your grandchildren for Christ. So how are you going to do that? What are you going to do?

Youth and Young Adults who have grown up in the church – what are you going to do with the opportunity you have to grow and mature in Christ now? There are millions of young people around the world your age who have never heard the Gospel – have no access to a Bible – cannot worship in a free society. You have this all. But what are you going to do with it? How are you going to grow? Who are you going to disciple? Not about training – walking with another.

Some of you already understand this. You get this and you have been discipling and leading others. I praise God for your leading in Sunday School or a small group or meeting with other Christians to encourage them or reaching out in evangelism.

If we do not collectively grow as disciples and disciple makers – if we continue on our current path then it is likely that two thirds of the children and young people we have with us today will leave the church upon graduation from high school. Half of those will leave the faith.

That is unacceptable to me. We cannot stay here. We cannot be comfortable with a come, be baptized and listen church. We must move forward. We must obey Christ's command to grow as disciples and disciple makers.

So how will we begin? First of all you need to say yes to Jesus' command to grow as a disciple and disciple maker. Maybe you're a parent of young children – you need to start now to introduce family devotions or spiritual conversations into your home. You would be embracing your role as disciple maker with your children. Maybe you're someone that is in the gap or you've just connected to Christ and you know that you need to grow as a disciple. You

need discipleship. You need someone to show you and walk with you to grow in Christ. Maybe some of you have been convicted that you need to be a disciple maker. You need to lead your children or your family or some person in your life, or make yourself available to one or several of those in our congregation young or old who need discipleship.

There's a response sheet in the bulletin. Some of you might not be ready to respond today. You might need to think and pray about this further. But I encourage you not to hesitate. I want you to write your name at the top. Then I want you to check one of the boxes in section 1. "Yes, I desire to grow – as a disciple – as a disciple maker or both. Then I'd like to know in what way or format you'd like to pursue this desire. Maybe you'd like to be discipled one on one or in a small gathering. Maybe you would be willing to disciple another person or small group. Maybe you'd like to start family devotions in your home and you need info on how to do that. Maybe you're in a small group but you'd love to do this with the people in your small group. Or maybe you have another way you'd like to pursue this. Check off one or more of those boxes. Then we will get back to you with information, resources and others who you join with or partner with to take the next step in starting in the next couple of weeks through the Spring.

I'm going to give you time to think and pray about this in just a moment. But if you feel you can't go ahead with growing as a disciple and a disciple maker at this time. If that's something you feel, we want to know about the obstacles you face. Maybe you have serious doubts about the Christian faith. But you've never had anyone to talk to about it. Then let us know that. Maybe there's something else that hinders you from going ahead right now. Then write that down and we will pray about it or contact you. Because we want to help you get to the place where you personally can fulfill Jesus' great mission and command for you.

To move ahead on this will not be easy. The enemy will oppose us. So I'm also calling you to pray this week as a church family about this. But this is a direction we are taking as a church. We need to move intentional and deliberate in growing as disciples and making disciples.

Now as the worship team comes, I want to give you a minute or two to think about this and write down your response. Then, during our closing song, I'm going to invite you to declare before God and this church your desire to grow as a disciple and a disciple maker by coming forward with your response and placing it in this box.