

Challenge to Discipleship

DISCIPLESHIP ESSENTIALS

"Challenge To Discipleship"

5/6/12

All verses from New Living Translation unless otherwise noted.



Two and a half years ago I began the most satisfying, fulfilling and exciting part of my life's spiritual journey so far. And I'm not alone on this journey. There are a number of people in the car with me. In fact the car has become more of a train, now.

It was preceded and launched with something we called a Retool Process which our church began in 2008. Scores of churches across the country were using this process to assess their effectiveness.

THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH

We chose about 30 individuals from our church to participate in the process and over a period of two years we gathered six weekends to do our work.

Out of the Retool process came a stark awareness that we were not doing an adequate job in the area of discipleship. We needed to help people grow deeper in their relationship with Christ.

It was about this same time that Willow Creek Community Church completed their Reveal Study. Their results and conclusion were amazingly similar to ours.

After an in-depth assessment of their church, they surveyed 1000 other churches across America. The churches varied in size, denomination, and geography and the conclusions were virtually the same.

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The late Chuck Colson said the church in America is 3000 miles wide and one inch deep. The majority of self-identified Christian adults in this country (52%) believe that there is much more to the Christian life than what they have yet experienced.

Basically, we're a country of spiritual lightweights. Pollsters George Barna and George Gallup both have determined that though as high as 49% of Americans identified themselves as evangelical or born again, Christians are having tragically little effect on the moral climate of our culture.

Cal Thomas, a Christian syndicated columnist has challenged the church to look at the quality of its discipleship. He writes that the problem in our culture isn't the abortionists. It isn't the pornographers or drug dealers or criminals. It is the undisciplined, undisciplined, disobedient, and Biblically ignorant Christians.

The number of divorces inside the church is only 1 percentage point better than the number of divorces outside the church.

Instead of expanding numbers of new churches and increased attendance, we're closing churches in this country at the rate of 3000 per year. We're not able to keep up with population growth in this country.

But the surprising thing is that in countries like China, India and Africa, Christianity is flourishing. Churches are multiplying and the number of committed Christians is growing rapidly.

In fact I recently came across a very encouraging report:

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MILESTONE DATES IN THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Date	Percentage	
1430AD	1%	1 in 100
1790	2%	1 in 50
1940	3%	1 in 33
1960	4%	1 in 25
1970	5%	1 in 20
1980	6%	1 in 17
1983	7%	1 in 14
1986	8%	1 in 12
1989	9%	1 in 11
1993	10%	1 in 10
Today	33%	1 in 3

This was taken from a 1994 Mission Frontiers Bulletin.

Today the number is 1 in 3 – 33% of world population.

Christianity is larger than Islam and Hinduism combined.

Today, if you go to fastestgrowingreligion.com you see that Christianity is the largest religion in the world; 68% larger than the second largest, Islam. It's 246% larger than the 2nd largest – Hinduism.

And, Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world with 25 million new adherents annually. That's like adding the population of Australia every year.

The number of new converts to Christianity every year is more than twice the number of new converts to all other major religions.

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But...that's not what's happening in America. Islam has grown by 67% in the last ten years and Mormonism by 45%. Christianity has actually declined slightly. Pastors across the country are asking the question, what are we doing wrong?

I think the problem is that we have mistranslated the Great Commission. 2000 years ago Jesus told his followers to go into all the world and make disciples. We thought he said go into all the world and build churches.

In America we can build churches. We can afford to. We like to. We can build big beautiful buildings and they make us feel successful but that's not what Jesus told us to do. He said go and make disciples and he said "I will build my church and all the powers of hell will not conquer it." Matthew 16:18

If I asked a hundred pastors in America what Jesus' last command to his disciples was, few, if any of them would be stumped. In fact most could quote it verbatim.

Matthew 28:18-20 "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all that I have commanded you. And be sure of this, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

Most pastors would probably have no trouble with the question. Jesus' last command was to go into all the world and make disciples. Now if I asked them to name his disciples I bet most would get at least nine or ten right.

But, if then I asked them to name their disciples, I might just get blank stares. Some might name a deacon or two, maybe even a few. But I know if you had asked me that question two and a half years ago, I would have been hard pressed to offer up any real results.

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It's the great omission in the Great Commission—making disciples.

In the early months of 2010 I read a book by Greg Ogden titled *Transforming Discipleship*. Completing his doctoral work at Fuller Seminary here in So. Cal he stumbled onto an amazing discovery about discipling in small triads or quads.

His doctoral project was a discipleship curriculum that was the basis of his workbook, *Discipleship Essentials*.

Anxious to see new progress in discipleship, in the fall of 2010 we launched a Wednesday night Discipleship Institute, offering a wide range of biblical learning opportunities.

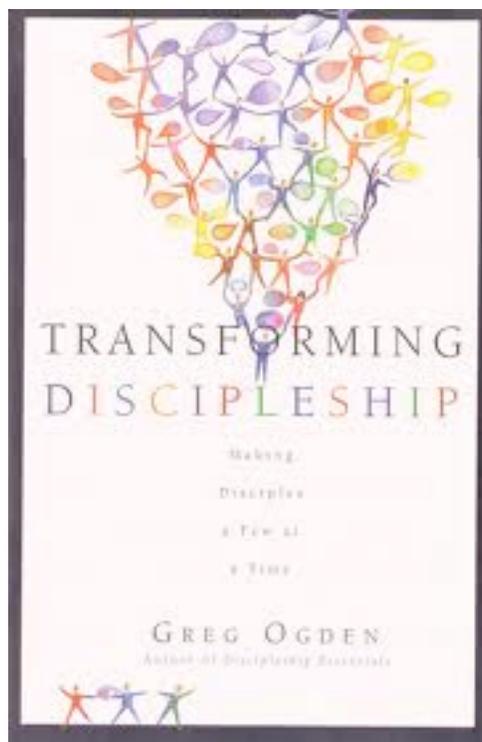
We also launched Inspired 31, a new exciting ministry to moms and daughters.

But out of the spotlight, almost unnoticed, and characterized as an experiment we launched three Quads and a Triad – small micro groups committed to intense discipleship – no announcements, no fanfare; just as an experiment.

Now, I'll come back to our story later, but let me take you back 2000 years and take a look at

THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH

There is a legend which recounts the return of Jesus to heaven after His time on earth. Even in heaven His body still bore the marks of His earthly pilgrimage. The cruel cross and shameful death were evidenced by His nailed scarred hands and spear pierced side.



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The angel Gabriel approached Him and said, "Master, you must have suffered terribly for mankind while you were down there."

"I did," He said. "And," continued Gabriel, "do they know all how you loved them and what you did for them?" "Oh, no," said Jesus, "not yet. Right now only a handful of people in Palestine know."

Gabriel was perplexed. "Then what have you done," he asked, "to let everyone know about your love for them?" Jesus said, "I've asked Peter, James, John, and a few more friends to tell everyone about me.

Those who are told will in turn tell other people about me, and my story will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of mankind will hear about my life and what I have done."

Gabriel frowned and looked rather skeptical. He knew well the reputation of mankind for not doing what they are told. "Yes," he said, "but what if Peter and James and John grow weary?

What if the people who come after them forget? What if down through the centuries people stop telling others about you? Haven't you made any other plans?"

And Jesus answered, "No, I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them."

In Luke 5 Jesus was preaching to a great crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Christ's popularity had begun to grow by this time and everywhere he went crowds were following. In fact the crowd that morning was so large, everyone pressing around him they were about to push him into the lake.

There were a couple of fishing boats nearby. The fishermen were washing their nets. Jesus asked if he could use one of the boats

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to preach from. When he had finished teaching the crowd, he asked Simon, the owner of the boat, "Hey, why don't we go out where it's deep and we can catch some fish."

Simon Peter must have been thinking, "This guy doesn't know much about fishing. Feeding time is over. We're not going to catch anything this time of day.

"Master, we fished all night and didn't catch anything, but if you say so, we'll go again." They pushed out, got to a spot and threw out their nets.

Suddenly the net were so full of fish it began to tear. They shouted to James and John who had the other boat to come help and soon both boats were so full of fish they were almost sinking.

Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John must have all overheard Jesus teaching the crowd. But then Jesus stepped into their lives, into their world and demonstrated his divine power with the miraculous catch of fish. Their response was one of amazement, fear and humility.

When Jesus offered his bold invitation, to join him in fishing for people, they left everything and followed him. Jesus spent the next 3½ years discipling them, and then sent them out to do the same. Jesus was calling them out of their vocation and former life, into a discipleship environment for the next several years.

In Mark's Gospel the call is succinct and concise; yet in contained the full essence of his challenge. "Come, follow me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." Mark 1:17 (NASB)

1st Come

This was the invitation and challenge to leave everything else behind; to abandon their nets, their boats and possessions, their relationships, vocations, aspirations, dreams and plans, to pursue something wholly new and different.

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In essence it was asking them to join with Jesus to do the work that he had been sent here to earth to do.

2nd Follow me

This represented their new direction and commitment – an all consuming allegiance. He would later say “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.” Luke 9:62

And not everyone followed that he invited. There were some who walked away because the “ask” was just too big.

3rd I will make you to become

This was Christ’s promise of transformation; his work in their lives. When people are challenged today to consider becoming disciples, many humbly realize the task is beyond them; and of course it is.

That’s why he assured us that he would be with us always. He doesn’t abandon us, leaving us out here on our own to do this job.

In Matthew 8, I noticed something unusual. “When Jesus noticed how large the crowd was growing, he instructed his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake.” Matthew 8:18

This is certainly a strange verse by contemporary ministry practices. The crowds coming to see and hear Jesus are getting larger and larger. That doesn’t seem to be that significant to Jesus.

In Mt 5:1 when he saw the crowd gathering, he went up the side of a mountain and sat down with his disciples and began to teach them. Here again, instead of playing to the crowd, he gets in a boat with his disciples and crosses to the other side of the lake.

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Sometimes we have to make a choice – do we invest in the crowd or do we invest in a few? Most pastors I know with crowds the size Jesus was attracting would have immediately launched a building program.

Remember what Chuck Colson said – the church in America is 3000 miles wide but only an inch deep. Jesus is seen here resisting the lure of the crowd; crowds being the primary goal in most ministries. Instead he chooses to invest in a few men.

Now He didn't completely ignore the crowd. In fact, he demonstrated great compassion for them, but he was obviously convinced that the only way to reach the masses was to build into the lives of the few, and trust the multiplication miracle that occurs when we use the biblical method.

4th Fishers of men

These four steps sum up the eternal redemption plan of God for all mankind. Christ's call to discipleship today is just as encompassing and eternally significant as it was 2000 years ago, and he extends it to each of us. He still requires total abandonment of self and full adoption of His earthly mission; the complete release of this life with unrestrained dedication to the one he gives.

THE INTENTION OF THE CHURCH

It becomes obvious at the end of the 3½ years of Jesus' earthly ministry, what his intentions were. After the horrific nightmare of the arrest, trial and crucifixion Jesus the church is in shocked disarray and full retreat.

Then Easter morning the world-altering event of resurrection occurs. For the next 40 days Jesus appears to his followers in various locations and gives them irrefutable proof that he has done just what he said he would do – conquered death.

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In his final moments before his ascension back into heaven to be with his Father he gives his final instructions, his final command. "I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the command I have given you. And be sure of this, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20

This is Jesus' final command. It summarizes his purpose for coming to earth and his purpose for the church for centuries to come. It succinctly states his complete intention for every sincere follower. Of all things happening in heaven and on earth today—this task is most important.

There is no higher authority. It comes from the mouth of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. There is no greater calling; there is no more important activity or vocation. This is to be done everywhere and it is to be done completely. Discipleship is not an option, and it is not complete until the new disciples are obeying all his commands, and his final command is what? To make more disciples.

The discipleship process is not complete until the disciples we make are making other disciples. A disciple is not really a disciple; isn't fully obedient until they are making disciples who are making disciples.

If you had to choose only one activity on earth—this is the one. Of everything we do, nothing is more important. There is no higher priority. But you say, I'm a parent; I have to raise my kids. Yes you do have to raise your kids, but Jesus said in Luke 14:26 "If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple."

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Jesus prioritizes our lives for us. He's not saying other relationships aren't important. He just wants to be sure that you get it; that you understand which is most important.

This is the primary indicator of a true follower of Christ. This is the tell-tale distinctive sign of someone obedient to Christ. This is the mark; the characteristic that distinguishes the fan from the follower.

(My prayer) God, help us to get this right and to never be deterred; to never stray from this calling and commission. Help us to put everything else aside and keep the main thing the main thing.

Now look what happens – the miracle of multiplication. If you were a flaming evangelist and you could lead one person to Christ every day, at the end of one year you would have 365 new Christians. Now if I just led one person to Christ but spent the entire year teaching that person how to make disciples, at the end of one year there would be two of us. Follow the chart and you'll see the genius of God's method.

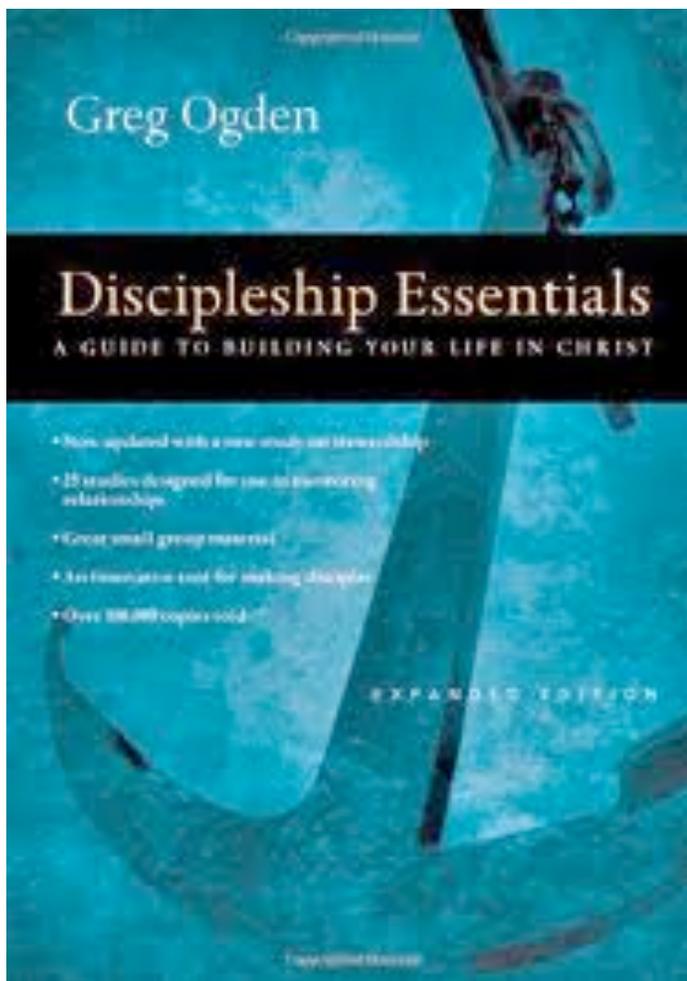
Year	Evangelist	Discipler
1	365	2
2	730	4
3	1095	8
4	1460	16
5	1825	32
6	2190	64
7	2555	128
8	2920	256
9	3285	512
10	3650	1,024
11	4015	2,048
12	4380	4,096
13	4745	8,192
14	5110	16,384
15	5475	32,768
16	5840	65,536

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHURCH

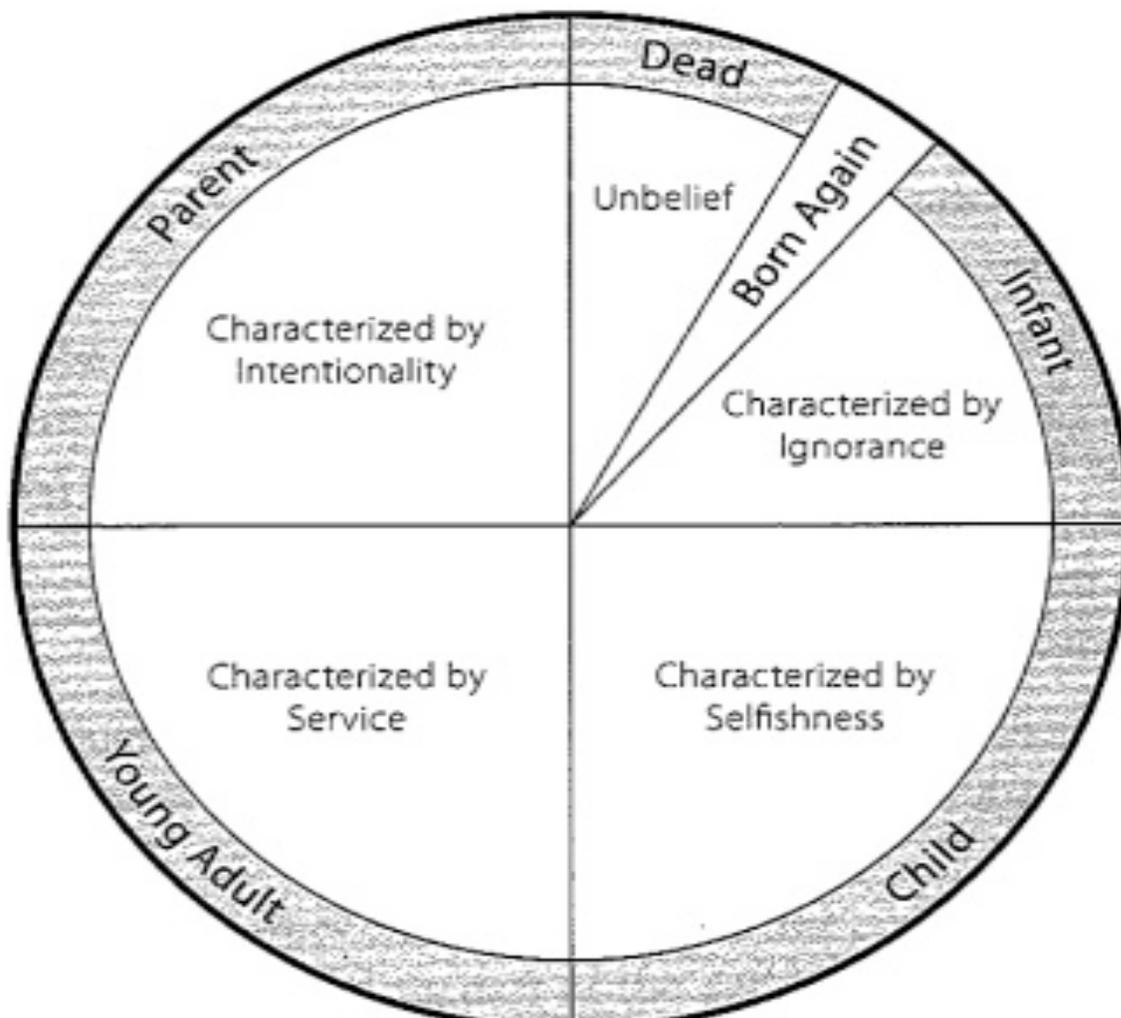
Now back to our story. When we began our Discipleship Initiative we adopted the curriculum designed by Greg Ogden called *Discipleship Essentials*.

It's a workbook with 25 lessons. If you completed a lesson a week it would take a half year. But discipleship is not information driven, it's transformation driven. The important thing is not completing a curriculum but allowing God to do the work of transformation in us.

All of us are babies when we start. Some believers remain spiritual babies all their lives. They never really grow up. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:1 "Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in the Christian life."



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This circle represents how we grow spiritually. We start dead in sin but then we are born again; born spiritually. Now we're infants characterized by ignorance. A baby doesn't know much.

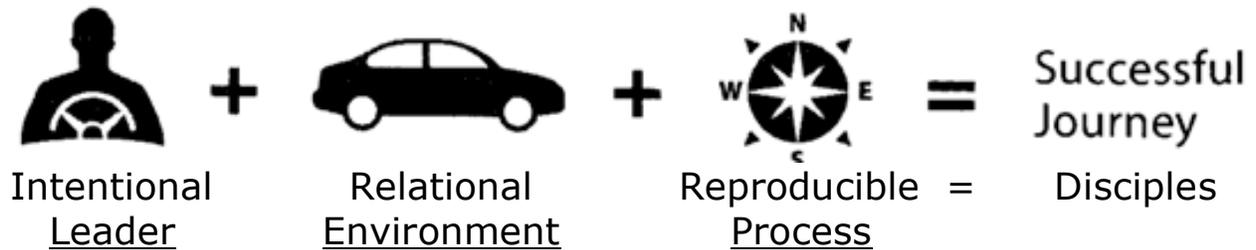
But as we help new babies begin to read the Bible and learn, they become children. Now children are still pretty selfish. They want what they want, and they want it now; and they cry and whine till they get it. But hopefully we help them grow to young adults. Now they become a little more interested in others. They begin to discover their spiritual gifts and can begin to serve. They respond to training and can become proficient in ministry.

But what Christ wants for every believer is to finally become not adults, but parents – disciple makers; those who are more concerned about others than they are themselves; those who are

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willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. Those who have learned how to disciple others like Jesus commanded.

Spiritual growth is intentional. It doesn't happen by chance. It doesn't automatically happen over time.



The leader is the one who gathers the group. The quad or triad is the relational environment. Our Discipleship Essentials curriculum is the reproducible process. Now we've put ourselves into position for the Holy Spirit to do the work of transformation and grow us into disciples makers.

In the January of 2011 we had 4 groups with 15 people. By January of 2012 there were 31 groups and 117 total participants. That was four months ago. Today there are 53 groups, 202 participants.

Let me leave you with this.

"Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my father in heaven will enter." Matthew 7:21

Jesus is just concluding a three-chapter sermon that he might have titled "Citizens of the Kingdom." In it he teaches about be-

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attitudes, salt & light, the law, anger, lust, divorce, revenge, loving enemies, giving, prayer, fasting, money, worry, judging others, the way to heaven, and fruitfulness.

He concludes with a powerful illustration about the wisdom of obedience and the foolishness of ignoring his instructions--it's the difference between building a house on rock or on sand.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." Too often in churches we have used the wonderful truths about Christ's love, forgiveness and mercy to teach people that they don't really need to follow Jesus to be Christians.

We've asked them to make a commitment to a set of religious facts about a religious figure. We've made the test for salvation doctrinal rather than behavioral.

But, believing without discipleship isn't believing, it's just a head game. Real faith is a faith that follows; that obeys Christ's commands. Discipleship, following Christ and embracing his mission is the proof that our faith is authentic.

Prayer – Father, help us never to settle for mental assent that fails to produce a life-long commitment to following Jesus and being conformed to his image.

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A DISCIPLE'S COVENANT

In order to grow toward maturity in Christ and complete *Discipleship Essentials*, I commit myself to the following standards:

1. Complete all assignments on a weekly basis prior to my discipleship appointment in order to contribute fully.
2. Meet weekly with my discipleship partners for approximately one and one-half hours to dialogue over the contents of the assignments.
3. Offer myself fully to the Lord with the anticipation that I am entering a time of accelerated transformation during this discipleship period.
4. Contribute to a climate of honesty, trust and personal vulnerability in a spirit of mutual upbuilding.
5. Give serious consideration to continuing the discipling chain by committing myself to invest in at least two other people for the year following the initial completion of *Discipleship Essentials*.