

Challenge to Discipleship

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"We needed to retool our church."

I bring greetings from my home church, Camarillo Community Church, in Camarillo, California. Seven years ago my church began the most exciting and fulfilling season in the life of the church.

It was preceded and launched, with something called a Retool Process. In 2008 the church began an in-depth assessment of its ministry effectiveness.

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

It was about this same time, approximately 1000 other churches across America did a similar survey. The churches varied in size, denomination, and geography, but the conclusions were virtually the same.

The late Chuck Colson, a well-known Christian leader in *our* country, said the church in America is 3000 miles wide, and one-inch deep.

Basically, *we're* a country of spiritual lightweights. Surveys show that as high as 49% of Americans, identify themselves as evangelical or born again. But Christians are having tragically little effect on the moral climate of the culture.

Newspaper columnist, Cal Thomas, who is a Christian, challenged the church to look at the quality of its discipleship. He wrote that the problem in the 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 *our* country, at the rate of 3000 per year.

But a 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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DATES IN THE GROWTH OF WORLD 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

This was cited in a 1994 Mission Frontiers Bulletin.

Today the number is 1 in 3, – 33% of world population claim to be Christian.

Christianity is larger than Islam and Hinduism combined.

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 3rd largest – Hinduism.

And, Christianity is also the fastest growing religious group 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 would build his church. 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 not be able to answer. In fact most could quote his command word for word.

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 think most would be able to name nine or ten.

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, a few years ago, I would have found it difficult to offer up any real results.

This is our great omission in the Great Commission – making disciples.

In the early months of 2010 the ministry leadership team, at Camarillo Community Church, read a book by Dr. Greg Ogden, titled Transforming Discipleship. Completing his doctoral work at Fuller Seminary, in southern California, he stumbled onto an amazing discovery, - discipling in small triads or quads.

His doctoral project was a discipleship curriculum, that became the basis of his workbook, Life In Christ. Anxious to see progress in discipleship, in the fall of 2010 Camarillo Community Church launched a new discipleship initiative.



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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 big announcements; just as an experiment.

Now, I'll come back to that story later, but let me take you back 2000 years.

THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

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 to preach from. When he had finished teaching the crowd, he asked Simon, the owner of the boat, "Hey, let's 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 another 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 crowds. 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. He sent them out to disciple others.

Jesus was calling them out of their vocation and former life, into a new lifestyle; a lifestyle of discipleship.

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



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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 completely new and different.

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

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

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 saw 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 so important to Jesus.

In Matthew 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.

Sometimes we have to make a choice – do we invest in the crowd or do we invest in a few? Most pastors I know, if they were attracting crowds the size Jesus was attracting, would immediately launch 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.

He still requires total abandonment of self, and full adoption of His earthly mission; the complete release of this life, with unrestricted dedication to the one he gives.



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THE INTENTION OF THE CHURCH

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 concisely states his complete intention, for every sincere Christ-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.

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.

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 children. 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.”

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 – making disciples.

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 zealous evangelist and you could lead one person to Christ every day. At the end of one year you would have 365 new Christians.



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Now, however, if you led only one person to Christ that year, but spent the entire year teaching that person how to make disciples, at the end of one year there would be two of you. Follow the chart and you'll see the genius of God's method.

By year 16 the discipler has reached far more people. If you continued the multiplication process another 14 years, a total of 30 years, you would disciple every person on the planet.

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHURCH

Now back to the church's story. When *we* began *our* Discipleship Initiative *we* adopted the curriculum designed by Dr. Greg Ogden called ***Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ***.

It's a workbook with 25 lessons. If you complete one 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 our lives.

In the January of 2011, the church had 4 groups with 15 people. By January of 2012, there were 31 groups and 117 total participants. In May of 2012, there were 53 groups, 202 participants; today in 2015, we have over 100 groups with more than 300 involved; and the multiplication goes on.

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 concludes the Sermon on the Mount 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.

German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

Believing without discipleship, isn't really believing; it's just verbal or intellectual agreement. 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.

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. I pray that the people of this wonderful church will rise to the challenge of true discipleship.

