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**Discipleship Disaster**

By Freddy Davis

Barna Research is a company which does polling to discover what Americans believe about a whole host of ideas. As a specifically evangelical Christian organization, they are particularly focused on issues of interest to the Christian community.

Recently, they did a survey to discover the state of discipleship in American Christianity. This survey turned up some quite fascinating results.

- Only 20% of Christians are involved in some sort of discipleship activity.
- Of those involved in what they consider discipleship activity, the kind of involvement includes: 43% in a Sunday school or fellowship group, 33% studying the Bible with a group, 25% reading and discussing a Christian book with a group, and 17% meeting with a spiritual mentor.
- While 52% of churchgoers believe the church does a good job of helping people grow spiritually, only 1% of pastors are of that opinion.
- 36% of Christians say they are almost where they want to be in their spiritual life.
- 38% of Christians say they are happy with where they are in their spiritual life.

While these numbers show a very anemic situation when it comes to discipleship and spiritual growth among Christians, there is another way of looking at this that is even more disturbing. When we see the stat that 20% of Christians are involved in some sort of discipleship activity, that means 80% are not.

One of the very big problems most Christians have in understanding this topic has to do with

how discipleship fits into the overall picture of the Christian life. Most seem to look at discipleship as some kind of activity which can help them know more about God and the Christian life. While that element certainly is included in the process, that point of view is a disaster for understanding the actual intent of discipleship.

**What is Discipleship?**

The concept of "discipleship," in modern Christian circles, has largely come to be associated with training classes and systems. Not to be too harsh about this, learning about the basic elements of the Christian faith, along with faith skills, is an essential part of the discipleship process. After all, you can't live out what you don't know and understand. That said, the concept itself goes much deeper.

The core idea of discipleship relates to becoming the disciple of someone. This, certainly, involves learning what they know, but that is not enough. True disciples seek to actually become like the master they are following. So, to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, Christians must not only learn the things associated with the life and ways of Jesus, they must actually work to conform their lives to him. Discipleship is more about who we become than what we do. Doing emerges from being, not the other way around.

In the Christian faith, discipleship is actually a part of the salvation process itself. Many people think of salvation simply as the act of inviting Christ into one's life. But its essence is not simply an act; it is a process. The act of inviting Christ into one's life is the beginning of the process; but if a person goes through all the right motions to enter the faith and does not follow

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through with a changed lifestyle, it is quite doubtful salvation ever took place. Once a person takes the step to enter into a personal relationship with God (justification), the truly saved person's life will be changed. There will be a deep desire to live in fellowship with him, which is expressed by a constant effort to put aside sin and put on Christlikeness (sanctification). And this is where true discipleship is demonstrated.

In order to enter a life of growth toward spiritual maturity, one must, certainly, learn the Bible and the ways of God. But it is not the learning that is central, it is the life lived based on what is learned. It is a life that is striving for holiness in order to live in daily relationship with God that demonstrates that a person is truly a disciple of Christ.

### **Discipleship Takes Effort**

I am not going to sugar coat this: being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not simply a matter of learning Christian things. It is a matter of becoming like Jesus.

To get some perspective, what was Jesus like that we need to model? Well, in the face of opposition, he actively promoted the Kingdom of God by: engaging in civil disobedience for righteous reasons, witnessing to the lost, helping the down and out, calling out evil in the culture, and, literally, giving his life for people who needed God. Of course, we can't provide salvation for others, but we can put our lives out there to promote the Kingdom, as Christ did, in order to point people to God.

But doing that is not the easy life of simply going to church and participating in Sunday school and worship services. Of course, we need to need to worship, and we do need to learn. These cannot be

neglected if we are going to keep our fellowship with God primary, and if we are going to learn the things we need to know to do God's work out in the world. But a disciple is an actor – not a passive observer. If you want to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, you are going to have to make that a priority in your life and become active in doing the work of God based on his leading.

### **Where Do You Stand?**

Honestly, I don't think our biggest problem is understanding what we ought to do. I talk to Christians all the time who tell me they know they ought to be more faithful in developing their spiritual lives, but for whatever reason just don't put any effort into it. We live in perilous times. And while there are various acts we can do to promote a better society, any actions we take on that front are merely stop-gap measures. The real problem in society is a heart problem – and Christians are the only ones who have the solution. But a solution is no good if those who have it don't share it with those who need it.

Our evil world needs the Savior! But in order for us to be able to effectively express the gospel to them, we have to learn how to share it using concepts they can understand. To put ourselves in a position to do that, we must intentionally commit ourselves to be not simply believers in Christ, but disciples of our master.

So, where do you stand on this front? What do you need to do to take it to the next level? What will you do from this point on in your life to become a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ?

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