

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Active Disciples: The Foundation of a Healthy Church

by Dan Trygg

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to obey all that I commanded you”

Matthew 28:19-20

“As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. ³¹ Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine’”

John 8:30-31

“And He was saying to all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’”

Luke 9:23

I was talking with a pastor the other day, and he was commenting about how his perspective on ministry has changed over the years. He had come up at a time when the church growth movement had emphasized gimmicks, technology and attractive programs to start and build a church. **Oftentimes, marketing strategies, and special programs succeed in gathering a crowd, but his observation has been that they don't produce mature disciples.** In fact, **if you look at churches in America, the vast majority are comprised mostly of people with a very minimal level of commitment to Christ.** There is very little in their lives that indicate a serious pursuit of God, or a deep willingness to serve Him. **What is wrong? I believe we are focused on the wrong things!** We are not following what the Bible says it means to *be a Christian*, nor what it means to *follow Jesus*. We have lost the vision and purpose for what church meetings are for, ...and *our* gatherings are not designed to do the same things that NT meetings were designed to accomplish. We are not looking for the same things that God is looking for from us. **We don't expect very much from Christians today, not compared with the expectations of God in the NT. We think that having a lot of people in our meetings is success, but God is looking for something else.** We think that if we get the word out to a large number of people, then we are fulfilling the great commission. Apparently, we haven't read what Jesus said very closely. **We think that if we can get people to “believe in Jesus”, then, surely, we are accomplishing what He wants us to be doing.** If we read John 8, however, we see Jesus challenging those who “had believed in Him” to become *real disciples!* From that passage alone, it is apparent that **“believing in Jesus” is not the same as seriously following Him, or His teachings.** Knowing who Jesus is does not mean that we are *actively pursuing Him*, or *growing*, or *living out His teachings*. If you doubt that, just look around, ...**most churches in America are full of people who “believe in Jesus”, but very few people are active disciples of the Master.**

You see, we have made the entry point equivalent to the finish line. Believing in Jesus was meant to be a start of a journey of discipleship. The end point? When we come to be like Him. Isn't that what He said? “...it is enough for a disciple to become *as* his Teacher” (Matt. 10:25). Isn't that what the apostle Paul said, “...until we all come ...to a mature person, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13)? Isn't that what the apostle Peter taught? Didn't he teach, “...do not be conformed to the former lusts, which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who calls you, *come to be holy yourselves* in all your habitual conduct” (I Pet. 1:15)? Didn't the apostle John say, “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone having this hope in Him *purifies himself*, just as He is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2-3)? **We are supposed to be growing in faith, becoming like Jesus.**

Just think about that last statement from I John 3. The converse would seem to be, “If anyone does *not* purify himself, then he must *not* be truly having a genuine hope in Jesus.” James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church, had a clear grasp of this issue. He wrote, “**What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?**” From the earliest days, it is clear that **church leaders had to confront this defective understanding of faith. Faith is not simply the acceptance of an idea. Genuine faith requires action, movement, in a person's life.** If a person comes to real faith in Jesus as Savior and Master, he or she will choose to *change the direction* of his or her life. **Before, they were living for self; now, they will live for Jesus.** You cannot *say* that you believe in Jesus and *remain unchanged, disengaged, and unmoving.* **Commitment to Christ is a choice to pursue Him, and His will for your life.** This is at once the highest and deepest commitment of your life. Nothing else can compare with it. **How can you say, “I believe in Jesus” and remain unchanged? It is impossible. You cannot follow Jesus, and stay where you are.** You cannot pursue holiness, and remain in your sin. You cannot seek to walk in the Spirit, and continue to walk unaltered in the works of the flesh. *Somewhere you are lying to yourself.* **If there is no effort to pursue, no attempt to seek God, no different choices being made to draw near to God and do His will, then whatever it is that you are calling faith is a mirage. It is not real.**

You see, Jesus called us to “make disciples”, and He clearly told us what He had in mind by that **command**. The word itself means “active followers”, “practical learners”, “apprentices”. Jesus brought further clarity by insisting that we teach them to “obey all that I commanded you”. **A disciple is one who puts teaching into action. It is a lifestyle of obedience.** If *that* is the measuring stick, how are we doing? By and large, not very well. Most polls indicate that most American church people are virtually no different than non-churchgoers. Why? Because **we are not making disciples**; we are peddling *ideas, identification with a group, or membership with an organization*. We are promoting religious activities, religious meetings, and religious media, but not discipleship.

In the same way, our church meetings look nothing like the gatherings of disciples in the early church. We have lost sight of why God called His people out to meet. *Early church gatherings were small groups of people meeting in homes for the purpose of building one another up.* Yes, I said “one another”. *Each person felt a responsibility to be both a learner and a teacher, ...a “sponge” and a “washcloth”.* Each one came to *soak up* truth, affirmation and encouragement, ...*and each one came to minister to others, helping to wash off the dust and dinginess of the world, and express truth, love and encouragement to others.* **Church was an interactive exchange, not a one-way communication.** *As people learned the truth, they also learned to express the truth, by answering questions, sharing insights and speaking words of affirmation and encouragement. As they were known and loved by other disciples, they learned to return greetings, show kindness, express forgiveness and affirm others. As they shared their struggles and hardships, others came alongside to help and minister to them. By this, they became sensitized to helping others in their time of need.* **The way we typically do church today, the average person never has to share anything of himself, and never gets involved in the life of any other person, except on a very surface level.**

The values of honest, interactive ministry have been all but lost, in most of today’s formalized religious gatherings. **Why? Because we are not really trying to develop people.** We are not trying to teach *them to minister to others* in real-life situations. **We are trying to “have a positive experience”.** What *happens* when we have a “great worship experience”? We typically experience a temporary emotional high, but *we are essentially unchanged.* We usually have not developed any new skills. We have not been stretched in ways that will develop new character. We haven’t learned anything practical about how to help others. About the best we can offer is, “Come to my church, where we really have a good time.” **We are trying to fill up the seats in our church, but we are not effectively developing those people who come. How do I know? Because they remain unchanged and uninvolved.** The same could be said of sermons, or Sunday school classes. What real impact do they truly have? Generally, they have only a minimal effect. **What causes growth is self-investment and the application of new ideas, or the utilization of worship music to assist us in prayer or in ministering to others. Most of us come to church as spectators, not to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12); ...we come to be recipients, not participants.**

Most of us come to Christ and are thrown into a church environment that *others* have created. **We don’t think to evaluate what happens on Sunday mornings, or during our typical weekly meetings.** We have inherited a way of “doing church” that existed long before we came along. **There are traditions and expectations that our church cultures have accumulated in their history. These often serve as the baseline for what success is supposed to look like.** Many pastors are *unthinkingly* trying to do what someone else did, or suggested, because someone thought it was cool or was an effective way to gather a crowd. It is time to stop that! **We need to evaluate what is effective at fulfilling our mission. What is our mission?** Is it to gather crowds? Is it to distribute tracts? Is it to fill seats? Is it to have extended series of meetings? No. **It is to develop maturing, active, obedient followers of Christ, ...people who are living like Him. When the people of God are different, ...when we are walking in love and holiness, actively involved in serving others..., then outsiders will take an interest. The problem is that we are not directing believers into a way of living that produces a life that is different, a life that is obviously filled with God.**

While we are trying to fill the seats, by entertaining people and making them feel comfortable, **Jesus was making people uncomfortable, challenging them to count the cost of following Him, whittling down the crowds to find a few good people, ...serious people, ...people willing to walk the Jesus-walk.** Jesus was looking for those who were willing to invest in their spiritual lives, by study, prayer, and *application*. The Pharisees studied. The Pharisees prayed. They followed a regimen of religious activities that was much more disciplined than Jesus’ disciples! The difference was that they were trying to become *self-righteous*. **Jesus’ disciples sought God to be filled with His life, His vitality, His righteousness, His love, ...and they acted on what they saw God doing in their lives.** Jesus taught and modeled a life of dependence on His Father, a life that is available to all of us in Christ through the Holy Spirit. **Jesus’ strategy was never about gathering a crowd; it was always about finding those few who would pursue God and live by the Spirit. Such disciples multiply.** It is the *only* way to reach the world. **Successful ministry is about finding, equipping and activating such impassioned people to live the Jesus-life and to be about the business of discipling others.**