



## THE STATE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CHURCH

*The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and . . . no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.*

A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

### ANCIENT BACKDROP

In Matthew 28 Jesus charged His Church with “making disciples?” What is Jesus’ paradigm for discipleship? Matthew 28 is the common passage looked to for *missions* and for the directive for *evangelism*. Yet Jesus said nothing about “evangelizing” the world or making converts here. His carefully chosen words are *make disciples*.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century church like the legalistic rich young ruler (Luke 18: 18-24) thinks it is our decision to “choose” Jesus; coming on our terms, not willing, in truth, to pay the cost. However, it is Jesus who does the choosing, not us (Col. 3: 12; 1 Pet. 2:9). It seems to be the case that the paradox of Jesus’ *free gift* of salvation and the *total cost* of following Him; the *real cost* of discipleship is totally misconstrued.

### THE PROBLEM

The apostles themselves fought a never-ending battle against doctrinal error, heretical teachings, and false teachers. A study of the apologetic nature of the epistolary literature of the New Testament reveals this. Century after century “the Church” has continued to drift from the foundation laid by Christ and the apostles.

#### *Forgotten Worship*

Man was made to commune with God in obedience to Him. Adam communed with God face-to-face (Gen. 3: 8a). The richness of *that* communion before the Fall can only be imagined. Since the Fall, our ability to worship God has been obscured. The farther down the historic road the church travels, the muddier our image of true worship and God becomes.

Why is this so? Serving Christ should be our primary goal in life. Nevertheless, that this isn’t the case is affirmed by the Christian researcher, George Barna:

When you ask believers to identify the single most important thing they hope to accomplish without suggesting any particular possibilities, only . . . (20 percent) mention anything directly related to spiritual outcomes. . . . Three out of five adult Christians we surveyed told us they want to have a deep commitment to the Christian faith, *but they are not involved in any intentional effort to grow spiritually* (italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

Stated differently, 80% of believers have *no thought* of anything spiritual regarding the most important thing they hope to accomplish in life and 60% have *no strategy* to grow spiritually. And this is in the ranks of believers!

The Tozer’s epigraph at the beginning neatly sums up the challenge of the church in the twentieth century flowing into our millennia as well. Tozer’s perspicacity of the dilemma of the church in his era is needed more so in our milieu. His caveat is this:

We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true . . . of the company of Christians that comprises the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the

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<sup>1</sup>George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 34, 35.

Church is her idea of God, just as *her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God* (italics mine).<sup>2</sup>

What is the *mental image* of God today's church sustains? What is *our idea* of God? What indeed is *our witness* concerning God?

The no nonsense answers to these questions are eloquently illuminated by Tozer in this passage: "The most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, . . ." <sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine). The God the world sees through Christianity is weak, bland, and unconvincing and the image drawn from our pulpits is sterile. As Tozer posits, what speaks the loudest is what *is not said* and what *is not done*. Christians today follow Christ with their lips; not with their lives. Therefore, the self-disclosed witness concerning the God proclaimed now is *not* the God Paul worshipped and died for. Our god is the god of "The Rich Young Ruler." That is to say, he is a false god, nothing but a cold, dead idol!

### *Postmodern Plague, Modernity Lost*

Friedrich Nietzsche and his atheistic philosophy have negatively impacted cultures worldwide. While many were responsible for stoking the flames of postmodernism, one could assert that Nietzsche poured on the gasoline. Colson and Vaughn tell of Nietzsche's parable of the madman seeking God in the marketplace screaming, "I seek God! I seek God!" Heckled by the marketplace crowd, he glowered at them crying, "We have killed him [God]—you and I . . . how have we done this? How could we swallow up the sea? . . . What will we do as the earth is set loose from its sun?"<sup>4</sup>

Colson goes on to explain that, "Nietzsche's point was not that God does not exist, but that God has become irrelevant. . . . God is dead not because He does not exist, but because we live, play, procreate, govern, and die as if He doesn't."<sup>5</sup> Modernity took its last gasp as the tsunami of postmodernism and deconstructionism sucked her down, capsizing the church along with the culture.

Culture and Christians alike are now firmly mired in the age of postmodernism or deconstructionism. A fairly long word, "deconstructionism"; chiefly it is "a form of hermeneutics, of interpreting a text."<sup>6</sup> However, deconstructionism has big arms and embraces many philosophical "isms." It "embraces *conventionalism* . . . all meaning is relative . . . [it embraces] *perspectivalism* . . . all truth is . . . [based on] one's perspective . . . [it embraces] *semantic progressivism* . . . a text can always be deconstructed."<sup>7</sup> It embraces even more, but these will suffice to affirm these "isms" are why effective apologetics and committed disciples are crucial today.

These are the last days (Hebrews 1:2), very likely near the end. When one looks at the spectrum of spiritual warfare arrayed against the church today it becomes clear the church of Christ must immediately return to its biblical mandate to "make disciples" modeled in Scripture. Genuine Christians need to stop merely paying lip service to spiritual development and begin to take their discipleship seriously.

### **THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP**

Christians understand "[we] are saved through faith . . . it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2: 8, 9). It is

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1961), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Colson, Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (co-published by William Morrow and Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 181.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, adapted (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 192.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 192,193.

indeed a free gift; nevertheless, paradoxically it costs us our lives. But why not—it cost Jesus His life. God's grace is *never* cheap.

Seventy years ago this year, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned the following:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting to-day [*sic*] for costly grace. . . . Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. . . . [here] the world finds a cheap covering for sins; no contrition is required, still less any desire to be delivered from sin. Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact, a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God.<sup>8</sup>

This singular quote not only affirms and intensifies Tozer's assertions, but aligns with the Barna Group's copious research and is empirically confirmed in our churches and our culture.

Christians have soaked up the same anemic message denying the True God for decades; hence the Word is denied in our lives. Perhaps dear reader, you think I am being too harsh or severe. No doubt if one is comfortable in their place in the church their blinders will block out what they do not wish to see—that is true. Nevertheless, when the church denies the living Word of God, the world *hears what we preach*. The world observes our lives and sees no distinction.

### FOLLOW OUR LEADER

It is time to band together as brothers and sisters in Christ and recapture the spirit and truth of bona fide worship by recapturing the “awe and fear of God. Then using the paradigm given by Christ in The Holy Scriptures we can begin to learn the meaning of discipleship and making disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28: 19, 20).

Let's unpack these verses.

The first phrase and last phrase are a proclamation of a kind of parenthetical promise enfolding His command. “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.*” That is a lot of power. That tells us God *is the power* in all creation; over nature and over men, over the powerful and the poor, over the potent and the lowly.

The second segment in the last sentence Christ tells us, “*Behold*” that is, check it out; “*I am with you always.*” That would be forever. If He is “*with us always,*” He will definitely be with us to “*the end of the age*” when He will return to take His Bride, the Church, home.

There are a number of other “verbs” in the Matthew 28 passage, but not all are in the imperative, they are participles; not commands.

1. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.* There is only one imperative verb here; *make disciples*. Jesus does not mean to “get decisions,” “make converts,” or merely even *just* evangelize people. When a person apprehends the free gift, he is instantly justified, like a baby being born. But just like a newborn babe needs lots and lots of care, so does the budding disciple. Building disciples is a process running concurrently with a believer's sanctification (in fact it is part of his sanctification). Necessarily we all need the help of the church and other Christians.
2. *Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* Endemic of building disciples is doctrinal knowledge, but *not just* doctrinal knowledge. Old and new believer's need to be reading the Word, praying, and sharing the Gospel message.

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<sup>8</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1937), 45, 46.

3. *Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* Each of us is to be baptized as a public declaration of our new relationship with God. This *should be* indicative of our comprehension that while Christ's atoning gift was apprehended at no cost, our lives now *totally* belong to our Messiah who purchased them.

To put it another way, the battle was won from the foundations of the earth. Why run the wrong way with the ball? Why are we so timorous? True worship means laying down one's life for Christ, in death, if needs be; but more so in life. It is our lives the world scrutinizes. Scripture and prayer are the founts of power the Christian draws on.

John 4: 24 declares to us, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. The word spirit in this passage is *pneúma*. Which in this context "means [someone] with a *sincere mind*, [someone] with a *sincere heart*, *not with mere external rites*" (italics mine). In the oft too comfortable and familiar passage in Romans 12: 1, Paul admonishes us to, "present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which* is your spiritual service of worship."

"Sacrifice" as used here is employed metaphorically.<sup>9</sup> The Christian is not a sacrifice offered on an altar, but the life he lives should be sacrificially given in *service* for God's glory. That is, *service* acceptable to God. That is *worship* pleasing to God. This is *not* speaking of the "professional" pastor or someone in full time ministry. Paul is speaking of every Christian in every vocation. This is not "rocket surgery." If the believer's life is lived with this deportment it *is worship!* True believers should live a radically committed life for Christ. After all, He was radically committed to live for us . . . and to die for us.

Nevertheless, while Christ's earth-shaking sacrifice on the cross shattered sin's grip on humanity, His death on the cross was not His ultimate deed. His preeminent act was *eternally annihilating death* by the Resurrection thus shredding Satan's title deed for mankind.

The power and the miracle of the Resurrection are second *only* to God's act of Creation. Understand—God *received nothing!* He did it all for us; for me and you—*that's radical!*

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<sup>9</sup>Spiros Zodiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, adapted (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 746.